Modernizing authoritarian rule in Saudi Arabia

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In the post-9/11 period, the Saudi state faced mounting pressure to appropriate the rhetoric of reform and introduce a series of reformist measures and promises, although none posed a serious challenge to the rule of the Ál Sa‘úd. This involved the opening of the public sphere to quasi-independent civil society associations, limited municipal elections, and a relatively free press. Reform of the royal house, aimed at dealing with possible future problematic succession to the throne, was also part of a general trend. This article deals with state-initiated reforms the objective of which was to modernize authoritarian rule without risking the loss of too much power to the constituency.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia; authoritarian rule; political reform

The state reformist agenda

The National Dialogue Forum 2003

Faced with violent terrorist attacks, the government realized that its security and intelligence agencies could only deal with some aspects of the problem; it needed to enlist society itself to fight the menace and defend the realm. It reached out to official ‘ulamā’, established religious institutions, academics, writers and journalists, hoping to enlist them in a newly founded forum, the King ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Centre for National Dialogue. In August 2003, the government announced the formation of a new platform that would assemble carefully selected intellectuals and professionals to engage in open debate about pressing social, religious and cultural issues, according to a predetermined agenda. The government issued a declaration regarding the first meeting, which attracted the elite of the country and in the spirit of fraternity and Islam, they held discussions on national matters and reached constructive recommendations that enhance adherence to the Islamic faith and confirm national unity:

The main objective is to combat extremism and foster a pure atmosphere that give[s] rise to wise positions and illuminating ideas that reject terrorism and terrorist thought … the dialogue will not accept turning freedom into obscene abuse, name calling or attacking the national and good ‘ulamā’.

This statement set the parameters for future dialogue sessions, while excluding any reference to political reforms that might challenge the rule of the house of Sa‘úd.

The National Dialogue Forum became an annual event, held in various cities. Meetings have taken place in Riyadh, Medina, Mecca, Jiddah and Buraydah. Each year the government-appointed organizing committee announces a new topic for"
discuss and recruits speakers, who prepare presentations relevant to the chosen subject. Topics have included terrorism and extremism, religious excess and moderation, religious tolerance and difference, youth problems, education, labour, and women’s rights. After discussions lasting several days, the meetings end with a series of recommendations, which remain non-binding and without an executive body to implement them where the recommendations are usually listed in a letter addressed to the King. According to the National Dialogue general secretary, Faysal ibn Mu’amar, the recommendations are advisory and not legislative, but ‘there are ideas that are currently under study to take into more serious actionable consideration … everyone is calling for implementation of the recommendations according to a timetable’ (Qusti 2007). It is understood that these recommendations will inform the relevant government agencies and policy-makers.

The National Dialogue Forums were initially closed to the general public, but after a few years they were broadcast on television. This carefully staged forum has become a public event attracting commentators, supporters and critics. With the proliferation of Internet discussion boards and other new communication technology, such as text messaging and YouTube, it has become possible for Saudis outside the annual forums to debate and discuss the merits of these institutionalized new platforms.

The first National Dialogue session was held in Riyadh in June 2003, a month after the first major terrorist blast hit the capital and three months after the occupation of Iraq. The severity of the terrorist attack and the shadow of the occupation shaped the theme and agenda of the meeting. While no specific recommendations were formulated, calls for respect of the leadership and national unity emerged from the first preparatory event organized by the National Dialogue Committee.

The second National Dialogue meeting was held in Mecca in December 2003. Its theme was ‘Extremism and Moderation’, thus reflecting the government’s agenda to combat terrorism and extract a public statement denouncing violence and rejecting its ideological discourse. Sixty academics and experts in various fields, ranging from shari‘ah specialists to sociologists, psychologists, media specialists, and educationists, took part in the meeting. The participating ‘ulamā‘ emphasized the ‘middle path’ of Islam (al-wasaṭiyah); psychologists theorized the personality disorder of the terrorist; sociologists highlighted the contributing environmental, social and educational factors; economists stressed the relevance of marginalization and economic deprivation; political scientists highlighted the importance of participation and human rights; and media specialists debated about the role of the media, freedom of expression, and the reporting of religious sermons. After several sessions of discussion, eighteen recommendations were announced, stressing above all the need for national unity and tolerance of difference. Some recommendations addressed the need to agree on definitions of Islamic concepts that mark the boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims. The proliferation of unsolicited fatwas and religious opinions should be limited and subjected to control and scrutiny, according to one recommendation. Other recommendations called for widening political participation through elections and civil society institutions. On terrorism, a recommendation to rehabilitate and re-educate those who repent was endorsed. In general, the meeting backed government measures to enlist institutions and people who contribute to the public sphere through sermons, publications, lectures, education, and social work to support the state in its efforts to end the wave of violence that had erupted in Saudi Arabia.4

Successive National Dialogue Forums dealt with women’s issues, their role in society and their contribution to it (June 2004). Women participated in the meeting and
presented their views on matters related to their current situation and future economic prospects in a country where they form the majority of university graduates but remain marginalized in the labour force. Clashes between those who support more traditional roles for women and those who aspire towards greater participation and visibility erupted during the meeting. The latter were accused of promoting a Western agenda, the purpose of which was to destabilize society and threaten its Islamic piety and authenticity. The debate ended without serious consideration of the major challenge of absorbing the increasing number of educated women into the Saudi economy. Some female participants thought that conservatives and traditionalists had hijacked the meeting, and this prompted them to send a separate list of recommendations to Crown Prince ‘Abdullah, who met privately with a small number of female delegates.

Dialogue meetings on the youth, their radicalization, current unemployment, and future development were less heated. Participants called for an acknowledgement of the role young Saudis, who constitute the majority in the demographic profile of the country, can play in the future, and how this needs to be encouraged and supported through youth programmes, training and employment. These measures are considered a shield against apathy and boredom, both of which may lead to extremism and destructive, antisocial behaviour.

The government had two objectives behind the institutionalization of the Dialogue Forums. First, it was responding to the international media scrutiny of Saudi Arabia that followed in the wake of 9/11. The image of Saudi Arabia as a closed, secretive society, with limited public debate, needed to be corrected – and even reversed. While the government allowed international and global media to carry out investigative journalism on its soil for the first time, it endeavoured to create an atmosphere of openness and transparency through staged dialogue and consultation.

Second, the government was desperate to enlist civil society in taking responsibility for curbing the extremism and violence of the first years of the twenty-first century. One recurrent theme in all National Dialogue sessions was terrorism. This has confirmed the National Dialogue in its role as a platform whereby participants from various intellectual and professional backgrounds denounce violence, reconsider their previous ideological orientations, and assert their allegiance to the state and commitment to national unity.

The National Dialogue Forum is a state-run association, created under both internal and international pressure, to diffuse tension, alter perceptions, involve society in dialogue with the leadership and deliver loyalty. As such, the meetings are far from being an independent initiative organized and run by autonomous civil society associations, although the government and the civil servants in charge of organization have endeavoured to fix them in the public imagination as free platforms for consultation. The early enthusiasm surrounding the first meetings gave way to apathy, prompting one journalist to comment on the body language of participants in a later Jeddah session, some of whom looked as if they were enjoying a siesta during a hot afternoon in a five-star hotel. The euphoria surrounding this new initiative faded away with routinization and regularity.5

Many Saudis welcomed the initiative at first, as it gave intellectuals and professionals with different orientations an opportunity to present ideas, research findings and hope to influence policy; yet many realized that this dialogue would not produce serious political change.6 Political reform was simply not on the agenda, as later events, discussed below, proved. Serious political change remains elusive. The government proved resistant to calls for constitutional change that would bring an
elected national shūrā council to replace the 120-member appointed consultative body, the majlis al-shūrā. Allegiance to the leadership and consensus over its reform agenda was sought after each meeting. Social, security, religious, and economic themes dominated the forums, with no prospect of a serious political reform agenda finding its way to the top of the list of themes to be discussed. Bluntly put, the National Dialogue is a step towards modernization of authoritarian rule, without any serious impact on the course political reform takes in Saudi Arabia. It embodies a strong patronizing and paternalistic approach towards Saudi society and its public intellectual and professional figures, who were meant to learn the alphabet of debate rather than push their own reform agenda on the government. Instead of critically assessing the merits of the National Dialogue, the Saudi official press highlighted the absence of (a culture of) public dialogue (thaqāfat al-ḥiwar), which only confirmed the state narrative about the infantile and backward condition of Saudi society. Many applauded the state for educating its citizens in how to debate public issues within the limited confines of a government-sponsored national dialogue. The Saudi state invited its citizens to identify their culpability for the violence on the street, but ensured that the discussion would never allude to the direct role of the state and its religious institutions in creating the conditions that gave rise to the jihadi terrorism, both globally and locally. No discussant dared to link the violence to the wider political context or to previous foreign policy measures, such as involvement in the Afghan jihad in the 1980s, when the government appeased Islamists by succumbing to their agenda and increasing its sponsorship of Islamic education and charities to boost its own Islamic credentials. Instead, participants scrutinized society, its conservatism and intolerance of difference – all believed to have contributed to the terrorist crisis in the country. Intellectuals and religious scholars were invited to engage in self-criticism and profess loyalty to the leadership.

Nevertheless, the National Dialogue Forums should not simply be dismissed as window dressing. The fact that Saudis were brought from all sectors and intellectual backgrounds to debate important topics long considered taboo, and only discussed behind closed doors, is an achievement in itself in a country where top-down policy has been a feature of governance for many decades. Whether the forums will directly influence policy is yet to be seen. So far the government’s social, religious, and educational reforms have incorporated aspects of the forums’ recommendations. In the area of religious education and youth development programmes, one may find traces of uncontroversial ideas discussed during the forums’ sessions. For example, the government declared its intention to reform the religious curriculum in schools, and sacked preachers known for ‘extremist’ ideas. It also announced that 2,000 mosque imams who had violated prohibitions against the preaching of intolerance had been suspended from their positions, and 1,500 were sent for re-education (Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia 2004). It also announced programmes to modernize education in general and improve foreign language skills in response to improving the educational profile of young people and their competitiveness in an open labour market. But the government still resists formally opening the public sphere to women, although it is gradually giving them limited space in public events and in the media. Female journalists appear at official public events and report on them for newly founded satellite television channels such as al-Ikhbāriyah. Businesswomen have also participated in economic forums held in Jeddah, and some accompanied Crown Prince ‘Abdullah on foreign trips to the United States, China, and India. These symbolic acts were directed towards an international audience, eager to report on the new wave of social infitāḥ
(openness), clarifying the Saudi enigma, and lifting the veil on its most hidden secrets. The leadership capitalized on this opportunity to project an image of a country undergoing gradual social and economic modernization that nevertheless remains grounded in its Islamic traditions and faithful to its authentic culture. Critical voices, especially those of the marginalized traditional ‘ulamā’, were raised to condemn the increased visibility of women in the public sphere, but the leadership simply felt confident enough to ignore them.

So far the government has ignored calls to establish a separate ministry for women and social affairs, and has resisted removing women from the guardianship of their male relatives, or even allowing them to drive cars. Women were totally absent from local municipal elections, both as voters and as candidates. The exclusion of Saudi women from public life and the restrictions they face with respect to labour and movement have remained high on the agenda of international human rights organizations, without the Saudi leadership taking any notice of their critical opinions. The government often uses the pretext of khusūṣiyah – the ‘uniqueness’ of the Islamic tradition of Saudi Arabia – to opt out of implementing international treaties on the elimination of gender discrimination and religious freedoms.

**Municipal elections 2005**

The same external pressures that prompted the Saudi leadership to stage the National Dialogue Forums, coupled with internal demands for reform, led to an announcement of the intention to modernize local municipal councils that deal with the delivery of services in the thirteen provincial regions of Saudi Arabia. In October 2003, the Council of Ministers announced the broadening of citizen participation in the municipalities: half of their members were to be elected, and the remaining half appointed. This announcement led to the organization of municipal elections in February 2005.

Major administrative cities began to prepare voting stations. Eligible male voters were invited to register and receive voting cards. In Riyadh, the number of registered voters did not exceed 18% of those eligible to vote, representing only 2% of the population of the city (Menoret 2005, p. 2). A great level of interest, reflected in the high proportion of registration and participation, was evident in the Eastern Province, the home of a substantial Shi‘ah minority. In the small Shi‘ah city of Qatif, 46,000 registered voters were counted, almost half the number of those in the capital.

In all cities, candidates were mainly local businessmen, activists, and professionals who came from different backgrounds. Most of the candidates (60%) held university degrees. Some had Islamist orientations, while others were identified as leaning towards a liberal agenda, or simply drawing on their tribal credentials. The Islamists were supported by endorsements from known public figures and religious scholars, who praised the candidates’ piety and commitment to public good. Drawing on both modern campaigning strategies, through SMS messaging and the Internet, and on traditional hospitality, the Islamist candidates secured most of the seats in big Saudi cities such as Riyadh and Jeddah and smaller ones such as Medina, Tabuk, and Ta‘if.

The election results reflected the changing composition of the population of cities that now host a large proportion of the Saudi middle class. This class has been growing steadily since the 1970s. Most of its members are employed in the public sector, but many have recently found opportunities in the growing private sector. The liberalization of the economy promises to increase their numbers and lessen their dependence on employment in the government bureaucracy. They have expertise in administration
and employment and display entrepreneurial spirit. Election candidates sought the prestige of being elected rather than simply appointed to public office. Some of them were wealthy enough to sponsor their own election campaigns, which involved entertaining hundreds of potential voters, and offering hospitality before election dates.

The success of the so-called moderate Islamists in the municipal elections reflected the weakness of those with a more liberal orientation. The latter had relatively limited popularity and engagement with Saudi society. Commentators on the elections pointed to their marginalization; they had no access to public forums, unlike the Islamists, who capitalized on the support of important religious scholars in key institutions of education, mosques, charities and administration.

The elections were significant but limited. They generated unprecedented euphoria and reflected the readiness of Saudi society to engage with modern democratic procedures, despite its lack of democratic institutions and a vibrant civil society. In some respects, the elections brought the trappings of democracy without posing a serious challenge to authoritarian rule. There were some reports that the elected councillors did not meet even after months of being elected to office. Some elected members resigned two years after being elected to municipal councils as a result of frustration and inability to reach decisions on the delivery of services.

Despite government’s efforts to launch what was dubbed a historic opportunity to engage citizens in the functioning and administration of their regional municipal councils, it seems that ‘Saudi citizens took a sceptical or apathetic view of these elections’ (Menoret 2005). This is attributed to the fact that municipalities are seen as having limited authority, as they are mainly concerned with delivering basic services, and have no power to influence budget allocation or land development. Two years after the elections, a Saudi commentator stressed that ‘the municipal councils proved to be powerless … more than half the decisions have not been carried out. Most of the others have been in support of central government’ (Fattah 2007).

The elections remain, nevertheless, an important step towards modernizing an authoritarian government that has been put under both international and local pressure to institute reform. Saudi Arabia was seen as catching up with other Arab authoritarian regimes: the euphoria of local and national elections in some Arab countries in 2005 reflected widespread hope for a broader reformist agenda, starting with economic and social change, but which fell short of altering the structure of authoritarian rule, limiting the abuse of human rights, or restricting the coercive security measures of the regimes. The elections in Saudi Arabia were the result of a top-down decision implemented in a society with limited independent institutions and little freedom of assembly. Saudi society remains weak vis-à-vis the state, which prohibits communal action, with the exception of that which takes place under government sponsorship and authorization. From literary salons to sports clubs, camel pageants, poetry recitations, and elections to journalists’ and commerce associations, the state controls the seeds of potential civil society and independent mobilization. Through paternalism and patronage, it co-opts groups and creates the semblance of liberalization. Nothing exemplifies these strategies better than the move to establish a human rights watch organization.

Co-opting human rights

Saudi Arabia has acceded to four United Nations conventions: the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1997); the
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (2000); the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1997); and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1996). However, in 2004 Saudi Arabia was one of the few countries that did not have local independent organizations promoting, monitoring and defending human rights.

With mounting global pressure and a greater opening of communication and media channels, the discourse on human rights and reports on Saudi violation of human rights circulated in the global public sphere and reached the public in Saudi Arabia itself. The United Nations’ human rights forums, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Arab human rights organizations continued to monitor and publicize abuses in Saudi Arabia. These centred on the plight of immigrant workers, political prisoners, human trafficking and women, as well as children’s and minority rights.

In 2004, a group of Saudi activists and reformers held meetings with a view to establishing the first independent human rights organization, which they called al-Lajnah al-Ahlīyah li-Iqumāq al-Insān (Human Rights Social Committee). The group included journalists, writers, academics, and lawyers from all regions of the country. In a pre-emptive strike, the government announced the establishment of a new body, the Human Rights Commission (HRC), following a royal decree signed by the head of the Council of Ministers. According to the royal decree, the HRC is linked directly to the Council of Ministers; its objective is to protect human rights, according to international treaties and charters. The head of the HRC is appointed directly by the head of the Council of Ministers. Membership in the HRC consisted of eighteen appointed full-time members and six part-timers, headed by Turkī al-Sudayrī. It did not begin its work until 2007.

While the HRC was obviously a government watchdog rather than an independent civil society association, another organization emerged that struggled to maintain the semblance of independence. The National Society for Human Rights (NSHR) was established to implement international human rights charters signed by Saudi Arabia, according to government publicity (Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia 2004). The NSHR had 41 members, most occupying government positions. Like the HRC, this new body assumed the status of a government-approved rather than an independent non-governmental organization (International Crisis Group (ICG) 2004, p. 20). It established a website, issued newsletters, published annual reports and received complaints. It became a link with representatives from independent international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. It received researchers from international organizations and facilitated their research and visits to Saudi Arabia, becoming a gatekeeper, a point of entry for those exploring the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia.

The NSHR opened a complaints section on its website. This currently includes a plethora of serious grievances regarding violations of labour rights, the abuse of women and other personal security violations. Aggrieved individuals are invited to post summaries of their cases, with the promise that the NSHR will take them up with the relevant authorities or government departments.

In 2008, the activity section of the NSHR’s website was, however, empty – perhaps reflecting the organization’s limited scope for action and lobbying. Nevertheless, the NSHR has taken the cases of Saudi prisoners in Guantánamo Bay on board, and it occasionally posts an update on their plight. Similarly, the case of a Saudi
prisoner in an Israeli prison is regularly highlighted. The NSHR also publicizes the cases of Saudi prisoners in Lebanon and Iraq, where many are detained on suspicion of engaging in terrorist activities.

So far, however, the NSHR has not publicized the plight of prisoners of opinion, political activists or dissidents held in Saudi prisons without trial for several years. It has refrained from mentioning any violation of human rights by Saudi security agencies, the Ministry of the Interior, or the Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and Prohibition of Vice. Independent lawyers, ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Lahīm, for example, have worked on cases involving women who have been raped and deaths resulting from confrontation with the religious police. Most of the complaints published on the NSHR’s website are related to domestic violence against women, child abuse and other non-political cases. The society does not concern itself with general rights such as freedom of opinion and assembly or the right to hold national elections or demonstrations in the country. The fact that its members are government employees raises doubts about its neutrality and independence. In May 2008, a Saudi academic, Matrouk El-Faleh, was dragged from his office by security agents; one of his colleagues in the political science department of King Sa‘ūd University, a member of the NSHR, has been unable to publicize his case. El-Faleh’s arrest followed a letter he circulated on the Internet about the terrible state of Saudi prisons, where one of his colleagues, ‘Abdullāh al-Ḥamīd, had been serving a six-month prison sentence for inciting female relatives of prisoners to assemble in front of a prison in Buraydah where their husbands, fathers and brothers had been detained without trial for several years. Such cases highlight the limitations of the NSHR, exposing it as yet another cosmetic move towards modernizing authoritarian rule without posing a serious challenge to old practices.

Despite the establishment of a government body (the HRC) and a government-approved organization (the NSHR) with a mandate to protect and monitor human rights, conditions remain poor, according to international sources (Human Rights Watch 2008a, 2008b).

In paying lip service to human rights, Crown Prince ‘Abdullāh capitalized on his newly constructed image as a champion of reform, while many Saudis continued to experience the excesses and abuses of authoritarian rule in their daily lives. Small measures such as the municipal elections, the HRC and the NSHR are important symbolic acts that diffuse tension, respond to international pressure, and confirm the leading role of the King. The leadership does not, however, respond favourably to reform initiatives if they originate in Saudi civil society. Any successful step towards greater political participation must have the patronage of royalty. Equally, the protection and monitoring of human rights are better served by top-down organizations closely linked to the highest level of leadership. Reform from above remains the acceptable path towards small gains by the constituency. The state reform agenda became the key to preparing the constituency for a new era – that of the new king.

A new king

When King Fahd died in August 2005, the royal family respected the line of succession and installed ‘Abdullāh as his successor, while each powerful senior prince remained secure in his position as head of a key government office. It was hoped that ‘Abdullāh’s birth in 1924, a result of King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn Sa‘ūd’s strategy of marrying the daughters and widows of defeated historical enemies, would end the enmity
between the ousted northern Ḥā’il emirate and the newly emerging Saudi kingdom. ‘Abdullah’s Shammarī mother, Fahdah bint ‘Āṣī al-Shraym, was the widow of Sa’ūd ibn Rāshid, who ruled over the Rāshidī emirate before its collapse at the hands of the Sa’ūdī-Wahhābī forces in 1921. ‘Abdullah continued the tradition of his father, and included among his many wives daughters of the al-Sha‘lān of ‘Anizah, al-Fayz of Bānī Sakhir and al-Jarba of the Iraqi branch of the Shammar tribe.

On the basis of his mother’s background, a plethora of images were cultivated about ‘Abdullah. Images of the King as the repository of the tribal Arab–Bedouin heritage flourished as Saudi Arabia drifted into globalization and consumer culture. Having had a traditional upbringing in the royal court and with no formal modern instruction, ‘Abdullah capitalized on this heritage. His maternal connections and limited education, together with an early speech impediment, had delayed his rise to stardom among the many sons of the founder of the Kingdom, Ibn Sa’ūd.

It was only in 1962, thirty years after its foundation, that ‘Abdullah secured a permanent position in the Saudi kingdom. He became Commander of the Saudi National Guard, a military force consisting of the early tribal warriors who had conquered vast territories for the Āl Sa’ūd in the name of jihad against ‘Arabian blasphemy’. In 1929, once the conquests were achieved, this tribal force was regularized and rebellious groups were rooted out, with the help of the British Royal Air Force. The loyalists were assembled in small units forming a paramilitary force whose task was to protect the royal house. Under ‘Abdullah’s leadership this force developed into a modern tribal militia, on a par with the Saudi Army, led by Prince Sultān. In 1985, ‘Abdullah made the National Guard the sponsor of tribal heritage, folk dances, camel races and tribal poetry through the institutionalization of the Janādiriyah festival. ‘Abdullah became Second Deputy Prime Minister in 1975, and First Deputy Prime Minister in 1982.

As Crown Prince, ‘Abdullah became de facto ruler in 1995, following the prolonged illness of King Fahd (1982–2005), and King in August 2005. His main challenge was to retain power amidst an ageing group of powerful princes, each desperate to become king.

‘Abdullah inherited a kingdom torn by ideologically opposed groups, unemployment, corruption, insecurity and terrorism, yet enjoying a second oil boom. In 1995, his National Guard in Riyadh was forced to confront terrorism when an important building housing Americans providing military training support was blown up. The trend was repeated in the oil-rich Eastern Province when al-Khobar Towers were bombed in 1996.

‘Abdullah tried to deal with urgent domestic concerns. The restructuring of the Saudi economy, along with joining the World Trade Organization and speedy privatization, failed to absorb young, unemployed Saudis. Women’s employment became an issue in need of urgent remedy. Ethnic, sectarian and regional tensions erupted with the occupation of Iraq and the increasing polarization between Sunnis and Shi‘āh in the region. The education system was called into question for its failure to produce skilled workers, and was criticized for inspiring radicalism. State religion itself became problematic, and was questioned not only by the United States but also by Saudis.

Many Saudis urged ‘Abdullah to act on pressing social, educational, youth and economic issues when he was Crown Prince during the long illness of King Fahd. A minority considered these problems a reflection of the political marginalization of society and the limited opportunities for political participation. Some began to call for
a radical transformation of the political system from absolute to constitutional monarchy. Unable to engage in serious internal political reforms, ‘Abdullah invested in his reputation abroad. Regional Arab politics is always fertile ground for boosting Arab leaders’ credibility and for diverting attention from shortcomings at home. Following the footsteps of previous Arab rulers, he concentrated on Palestine. His Arab peace initiative, initially presented to *New York Times* journalist Thomas Friedman, and relaunched during the Beirut Arab League Summit in 2002, failed to bring peace in return for land. ‘Abdullah proposed peace in return for an Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders, pressed for the right of return for Palestinian refugees, and called for a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. Israel did not accept. The initiative’s revival in March 2007 did not bring tangible results among the warring Palestinians and Israelis. With the accession of Hamas to power internal Palestinian conflict erupted between this organization and Fatah. Drawing on Mecca’s symbolic significance in the imagination of Muslims, ‘Abdullah endeavoured to hold meetings there to reconcile the warring Palestinian factions. Fighting continued, and claimed many lives.

In April 2003, the US occupation of Iraq removed a regional competitor. ‘Abdullah, together with other Gulf rulers, breathed a short-lived sigh of relief over the demise of Saddam’s regime. Little did they know that the occupation would unleash one of the most deadly and bloody wars in the history of the Arab world close to their borders. No one expected that the promised model democracy in Iraq would pose any threat to other dictators in the region. However, thoughts as to how to contain the ongoing Iraqi sectarian war and the newly established al-Qā‘idah in Iraq became urgent issues for ‘Abdullah. More importantly, Iran with its nuclear programme emerged as the new regional power, dictating not only the outcome of the Iraq war, but also interfering in the very fabric of Arab society and politics, through its patronage of Shi’ah communities and Sunni political groups. With a substantial Shi’ah minority in the oil-rich Saudi Eastern Province, ‘Abdullah became nervous over the emerging Shi’ah power.

‘Abdullah, together with Mubarak of Egypt and King Abdullah of Jordan, expressed alarm over the emerging so-called ‘Shi’ah crescent’. Protecting the interests of Iraqi Sunni co-religionists was problematic given the complexity of the Iraqi scene and the presence of al-Qā‘idah, which also presented itself as a defender of the Sunnis. ‘Abdullah denounced sectarian killings and insisted on the unity of the Iraqi state. Once again Mecca, where the warring Iraqi Sunni and Shi’ah leaders and religious scholars pledged to outlaw the shedding of Muslim blood, proved to be a good place to hold a meeting under Saudi patronage. However, neither this meeting nor an increased US military presence stopped suicide bombers targeting civilians in Iraqi cities.

Iran’s growing influence in the region needed a counter-force to balance it. The US looked to Saudi Arabia, but failed to recognize that, even though he retains vast oil revenues, ‘Abdullah’s credentials were very thin even among Sunni Muslims in the region. Above all, ‘Abdullah was not able to use the wisdom of old age, traditional authority or charisma to his advantage to claim a special place among Arab rulers. Saudi Arabia had striven to replace Egypt after the latter’s ascendency in 1979, but ‘Abdullah could not, nearly three decades later, fill the vacuum as his brother King Faysal had done.

The 33-day Israeli–Hizbollah war in the summer of 2006 and the Saudi failure to push for an immediate ceasefire further eroded ‘Abdullah’s credibility. As the Israeli press ran several articles praising ‘Abdullah, and the Saudi-owned media, echoing
official Saudi statements, referred to Hizbollah’s war with Israel as an ‘adventure’, the King’s reputation, both inside Saudi Arabia and in the wider Arab world, was questioned. During that summer, ‘Abdullah fell out with Bashar al-Asad of Syria, who referred to defeated Arab rulers as ‘half-men’. After that war, the polarization of Arab politics between the so-called moderates, under the leadership of Saudi Arabia, and the radicals, under Iran’s patronage, became more acute, and ‘Abdullah’s ability to reconcile the two camps disappeared.

In addition to the rift with Syria over Lebanon and previous tension with Libya over an alleged attempt to assassinate him, ‘Abdullah could not contain the animosity of other partners within the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC). The deterioration of relations with Qatar over territorial disputes and the blunt media approach of *al-Jazeera* created an uneasy relationship with this small but wealthy emerging state. The old Egyptian–Saudi rivalry occasionally surfaced as Egypt was not enthusiastic over the concept of building a bridge joining Sharm al-Shaykh and Saudi Arabia. Both still compete over the leadership of the Arab world, and both are equally desperate to claim credit for cooling off Arab hot spots.

As the new King, ‘Abdullah needed a powerful media campaign to inscribe in the imagination of his people and the international community the beginning of a new era. The funeral of King Fahd was broadcast on Saudi-owned satellite television channels, followed by images of the new King receiving the oath of allegiance from a wide range of constituencies representing different sections of Saudi society. Members of the royal family promoted the semblance of unity and accepted ‘Abdullah as King. Key princes knew that his rule would not undermine their position or threaten their well-established control over policy, financial allocations or influence in the state. ‘Abdullah appointed Sultān Crown Prince and confirmed the other princes in their ministerial positions. The position of a second deputy, a long-established role, remained vacant.

‘Abdullah immediately set about dismantling the old image of the monarchy and replacing it with a new set of constructions. The old façade of a prince close to conservatism, tradition and tribal values was replaced with that of a modern monarch, a champion of reform and the eradicator of poverty. He toured the various Saudi provinces, danced with his subjects and promised the alleviation of hardship and deprivation. His royal tours had one aim: to tie the constituency to the new realm and enforce his role as the leader. Yet the King knew that his ability to push for serious political reform was curtailed by other powerful senior princes, especially those who controlled the regime’s internal and external security, namely the ministers of the Interior and Defence. The internal confrontation between the state and al-Qā‘idah from 2003 only highlighted the central role these ministries played in Saudi Arabia. Although ‘Abdullah himself was in command of the Saudi National Guard, he was only able to balance the influence of the other princes rather than determine the general evolution of the political affairs of the kingdom. He had to accept the fragmentation of Saudi politics and the proliferation of decision-making centres within the state, ‘Abdullah became the champion of the modernization of authoritarian rule in Saudi Arabia.10

*Reforming the royal house: the Committee of Allegiance*

In October 2007, in the face of the fragmentation of royal politics and the consolidation of powerful contestants to the throne, ‘Abdullah started the first initiative to reform the internal affairs of the royal house. He announced by royal decree the establishment of
the so-called Committee of Allegiance, whose main function is to ensure a smooth succession to the throne after his own death and that of Crown Prince Sultan. The committee came into existence in December 2007, when King Abdullah received its members and urged them to ‘stand united, settling any differences by transparent dialogue and without allowing external forces to interfere in their private affairs’ (*Arab News* 20 April 2007). The committee consisted of 35 members: the surviving sons of the Kingdom’s founder, Ibn Saud, and the sons of those who had already died. Elderly and ill princes were represented by their sons. Prince Mish’al, former deputy defence minister and governor of Mecca, was appointed its chairman. The only commoner on the committee is Khalid al-Tuwayjrī, the head of the royal court (*dīwān*), who was appointed as clerk (*amīn sir*).

The committee’s constitution states that it will become active only after the deaths of King Abdullah and his successor, Prince Sultan. Given the age of the surviving sons of Ibn Saud, the committee is meant to ‘elect’ a King by consensus from among them or their sons. Under its regulations, once a King dies the committee holds a meeting in order to officially name the new King. Within ten days, the new King must name his Crown Prince, or he may ask the committee to nominate one. In anticipation of old age and illness, the committee statute includes the setting up of a medical committee to report on the health of the King and Crown Prince. It will submit its report in a sealed envelope and in secrecy to the chairman of the committee, who can make it available to other members in the context of the committee’s meeting.

The Committee of Allegiance is an institutionalized mechanism whose main purpose is to regulate the transfer of office from one King to another should the succession be unclear in the event of the deaths of King Abdullah and Crown Prince Sultan. The previous principle of succession, which determined the transfer of kingship horizontally among the sons of Ibn Saud may not be possible in the future; thus the committee introduces the possibility of either skipping a senior prince or princes, and even moving vertically to a grandson of the founder of Saudi Arabia. Old age and poor health, both of which already affect the existing potential heirs to the throne, may pose future challenges to the succession. The existing sons of Ibn Saud are all in their late 70s and 80s, and are likely to suffer prolonged illness, as King Fahd did. To safeguard against the accession of an aged, incapacitated king to the throne, only because the horizontal seniority principle needs to be respected as it had been in the past, the committee allows the election of a king by bypassing unfit ones or even choosing one from among members of the second generation. In theory, the committee will ensure consensus among contestants by electing a future King and Crown Prince. Yet it remains to be seen whether this process will deliver a smooth succession in the future, especially when members of the second generation enter the contest for leadership at the highest level, following the deaths of King Abdullah and Crown Prince Sultan.

While awaiting this eventuality, each key senior prince has placed one or more of his sons as deputies and aides. The sons of current King, Crown Prince, Minister of the Interior, Minister of Defence and other junior princes are in key government positions and well placed to push for leadership roles in the future. It is likely that sons of the current senior princes will inherit their fathers’ ministries in case of sudden death, yet it may prove to be more complicated if members of the second generation enter competition for the kingship. The prospect of Muhammad ibn Nayif, Mif'īb ibn ‘Abdullah, Bandar ibn Sultan, Khalīd ibn Sultan or even al-Walid ibn Talal competing for kingship may prove to be a real challenge for the Committee of Allegiance.
Currently neither King ‘Abdullah nor other senior princes can adopt a vertical succession principle that would exclude the surviving sons of Ibn Sa‘ūd and their descendants in favour of placing kingship within the confines of one line of descent. For the time being, the committee may be the best option available to the royal house to tidy its internal affairs, in the absence of real and possible intervention from Saudi society or competition within the royal household.

The Committee of Allegiance is proof that politics and leadership constitute the domain of royalty, outside the influence of any other body in the Kingdom. The absolute monarchy persists regardless of any pressure, internal or external, for greater political inclusion and participation. The royal family excluded Saudi society, or those often termed *ahl al-hal wa al-aqd* (‘the people who loose and bind’, i.e. a designation in traditional *fiqh* literature referring to people of authority) from dealing with an issue seen as a strictly royal prerogative. The committee is meant to deliver the candidate for kingship to the Saudi people, who would later offer their oath of allegiance. Saudi Arabia does not have institutions or pressure groups that would push for the appointment of one man as King at the expense of another contestant. Even the religious establishment is not represented or consulted by the committee, and there is no elected representative body that may influence the committee’s decision. The battle for the future King will be fought and resolved among royalty in secret meetings. This new arrangement ensures the continuity of the monarchy against the hazards of demography, internal competition and conflict, and in isolation from society or pressure groups outside the royal house.

**Development as alternative to political reform**

Having secured the bureaucratization of royal succession, the King, senior princes and royal entrepreneurs turned to the constituency in an attempt to win its acquiescence. The old mechanism of distributing largesse was revived with the new wealth of 2003. In a manner reminiscent of the 1970s, royalty entered a race to distribute surplus, increase dependency and win loyalty. The revenues are now not only more substantial but are also the sources of largesse. Each prince and his sons became centres for the distribution of handouts, job opportunities in their own private financial and business institutions, and other benefits to which citizens could not gain access through the usual state welfare bureaucracies.

Educational scholarships were reinstated after a period of disruption and slowdown in the 1980s and 1990s. Both men and women were sent abroad on government scholarships, while others enrolled in newly established local institutes and training colleges. Yet none was guaranteed employment upon completing their studies. Rising inflation and basic food prices were dealt with by regular increases in salaries. The government reversed its policy and promised to subsidise rice, grains and other basic food products.

In a manner similar to that of the 1970s, the King announced a development programme, involving the establishment of six new industrial cities. Work began on King ‘Abdullah’s Economic City, north of Jeddah, promising employment in industrial plants – mainly petrochemicals, aluminium, steel and fertilizers – banking services and shipment. The city is meant to provide new job opportunities and residence units for workers (Mouawad 2008). The plan includes building houses, schools and mosques for the future workforce. So far, the government has relied on thousands of foreign construction workers, mainly from China and the Far East, to build this city.
The rising prices of construction material such as cement and steel have added to the cost of the project, thus absorbing millions of dollars in oil revenues.

The state reformist agenda involved reaching out to the international community to shed the bad publicity associated with 9/11. King ʿAbdullah visited the United States, and many European and Asian capitals. He met with Pope Benedict in the Vatican and called for greater dialogue between the Abrahamic faiths. In 2008, he sponsored a conference in Mecca where more than 400 Islamic scholars met to discuss the possibility and future of interfaith dialogue. While Muslim scholars from all over the world debated the prospects and limitations of such dialogue, some Saudi religious scholars condemned it, embarrassing the leadership and undermining its efforts to bring Christian, Jewish and other non-Muslim scholars face to face on Saudi soil. Shaykh ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Barrāk issued a statement declaring interfaith dialogue un-Islamic. Some religious scholars feared that the government would succumb to international pressure demanding recognition of and freedom for other religions and the building of churches in Saudi Arabia, as in the Gulf, where Christian churches and Hindu temples have already been established to cater for the rising number of non-Muslim expatriate workers. While the King was reaching out to other faiths, Saudi scholars issued petitions against the Shiʿah, condemning their heresy and blasphemy, and warning against their influence in Saudi society itself.

Conclusion

Since 9/11, the Saudi state endeavoured to re-launch itself in both the region and worldwide as a state committed to gradual reform. It rejected serious calls from substantial sectors of Saudi society to increase political participation. Instead, cosmetic reforms that attracted great media attention were encouraged. The municipal elections, engagement with human rights, staging dialogue forums, economic liberalization, and sorting out the inner circle of the ruling house were regarded as great steps towards reform. In fact, these measures reflected the limited prospects of serious change, especially that which affect absolute power. The main concern of the state from 2001 to 2008 was to contain terrorism that erupted in major Saudi cities. To enlist the population in the ‘War on Terror’, the state reached out to society to gain loyalty and enforce allegiance. Modernizing authoritarian rule was deemed necessary for this purpose. The leadership, however, failed to respond to pressures, both internal and external, to change the relationship between power and constituency. Rising oil prices since 2003 and the containment of terrorism have meant that today the Saudi state finds itself in a stronger position to resist calls for greater democratization.

Notes

1. This article is an extract from Al-Rasheed (2009).
2. Modernizing authoritarian rule is sometimes dubbed ‘upgrading’, a phenomenon that emerged in many Arab countries in the post-9/11 period. Heydemann (2007) specifies four developments that, in his opinion, reflect the process of upgrading: appropriating and containing civil society; managing political contestation; capturing the benefits of economic reform; and diversifying international linkages.
4. Many articles appeared in the Saudi press on the need to accept the ‘other’ following the National Dialogue Forum. Al-Waam and Arab News took the lead in promoting tolerance through their opinion sections of the newspaper (Qusti 2004).
5. Saudi officials stressed that no boundaries are imposed on the National Dialogue meetings.
6. Those who bluntly called for political reform of the Saudi monarchy were operating outside the National Dialogue Forum. Their various petitions will be discussed below.
11. Al-Badi (2008) publicized the merits of the Allegiance Committee as a step towards reforming the royal house.
12. For details on demands for reform initiated by Saudi society, see Al-Rasheed (2009).

References