

Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring

Karabee Kakati

Ph.D student, Centre for West Asian Studies Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Abstract

The Arab Spring was a chain of protests and armed rebellion that were held against the governments in West Asia. Several countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen and Libya saw serious protest whereas other countries like Saudi Arabia and Djibouti witnessed minor protests. The Arab Uprisings that started in December,2010 in Tunisia spread to its neighbouring countries like wild fire. However, inspite of minor protests, Saudi Arabia grew apprehensive about its impact at home and took various repressive as well as progressive measures to thwart the impact of these protests. Saudi Arabia feared that such kind of protests would create instability as well as feared about the survival of the Al Saud dynasty amidst it. The protest also brought to the forefront the various sectarian tensions which acted as an wake up call for the Kingdom. With Saudi citizens demanding more rights and freedom of expression, Saudi Arabia brought various reforms like granting women the right to vote and run for office. Apart from it in the cultural front, Saudi Arabia introduced entertainment and cultural events, thus, easing the strict social codes. On the political front, it eased restrictions on public speech as well as political activism.

This paper would make an in-depth analysis of the impact of the Arab Uprising on Saudi Arabia and the reforms the Kingdom undertook in order to cull the protests as well as mitigate the unrest in its domestic front. The paper would also analyse how the Arab Uprising impacted Saudi Arabia's

rentier economy as well as how it was instrumental in bringing new changes in relation to the Saudi Vision 2030.

Keywords: Arab Uprising, West Asia, Saudi Arabia, Rentier state, Reforms, Vision 2030.

Introduction

The West Asian region saw a significant transformation in its political environment as a result of the events of 2011–2012. Arab Uprisings that brought together various groups and united them in opposition to regimes across the area resulted in the overthrow of many previously established autocratic regimes. During this time, many monarchs and dynasties were deposed. While countries like Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya welcomed revolution, Saudi Arabia had minor outburst of political unrest. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was relatively free of violent protests despite growing socioeconomic worries, conflict between ethno-tribal groupings, and religious tensions.

In contrast to many other states in the region, Saudi Arabia did not go through a protracted upheaval. There was little dissent despite the fact that young Saudis (those between the ages of 20 and 24) had a 39 percent jobless rate (Mabon: 532) The wealth disparity between the rulers and the ruled also causes a great amount of distrust and political conflict within Saudi society. The political involvement and succession issues that Saudi Arabia faces are among its other key challenges.

Despite internal strife, the Saudi people did not imitate their counterparts in other West Asian nations. On March 11, 2011, calls for a "Day of Rage" in the Kingdom drew 36,000 individuals to a Facebook page promoting the event (Abouzeid). However, on the selected day, Riyadh saw only one protestor. A 40-year-old teacher named Khaled al-Johani participated in the demonstration in Riyadh (ibid). The demands that were placed were an independent judiciary, release of all political prisoners, freedom of expression and assembly along with dissolving of taxes and duties. A demand for minimum wages along with having an elected Shura Council was also made.

The expression of these demands is accompanied by a desire to lower the average age of government ministers, many of whom are over 60 (Abouzzohour). These requests reveal the rising

anger in Saudi Arabia over its economic woes, the Al Saud regime, and the country's political space limitations. These demands combine democratic pressures with economic worries, many of which are similar to those made during the Arab Spring.

The formation of present day Saudi Arabia

Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud, also known as Ibn Saud, founded the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. The third generation of the Al Saud family, Ibn Saud, made an effort to unite the Arabian Peninsula. Although foreign meddling played a significant role in the failure of the first and second states in 1818 and 1891, tensions between the tribes functioning within the Kingdom can also be used to explain these failures. Unifying the Arabian tribes was, in fact, the major challenge to be solved during the state-formation process. Saudi Arabia did not historically have a central authority state structure.

The socio-economic conditions of pastoral nomadism, intersected by urban and agricultural communities were where political organisation was found. The society of Saudi Arabia was divided between various tribal affinities that hindered Saudi Arabia's unification process. The regional and tribal divisions that worked against national unity had split the population of the young Saudi kingdom. Strong tribal relations always impacted Saudi Arabia's political and social fabric and has been a consistent theme in the daily lives of the people.

A diverse group of tribes had to be brought together to form the Saudi state under the guise of a one nationalist identity. The Al Saud attempted to accomplish this in part by forming a partnership with Wahhabi preachers who gave the Al Saud some measure of legitimacy. Inter-tribal marriage was the second method Ibn Saud used to try to eliminate tribe divisions; in fact, it is said that Ibn Saud wed into 30 different tribal groups (Mabon:536)

Problems Inside the Kingdom

The core of the Saudi Arabian social contract is an unwritten agreement based on the Rentier theory, in which the public trades political resentment for a lack of taxes. The ruling class is also in charge of providing amenities, especially by providing healthcare and education. But

this kind of tacit social contract depends on the sale of natural resources (oil in case of Saudi Arabia) and the Saudi economy's ability to bear the added financial strain. However, calls for political

reform become louder when the social contract started to falter. There are significant difficulties within the Kingdom despite the visible conformity between Saudi Arabian state and the society, based on shared ethnic links. As previously mentioned, the establishment of the Saudi state is discussed in terms of integration, particularly in relation to the various tribal groupings that existed throughout the Arabian Peninsula. The need for the ruling family to take action to bring the various tribes together while establishing the legitimacy and dominance of the Al Saud is evidence that tribal ties remain solid within the Kingdom. The discovery of oil brought attention to the fact that the nature of state-building and the accompanying modernization processes also raised tensions within the Kingdom.

The inflow of oil revenue and the modernisation initiatives that sprang from it clashed loudly with Wahhabi values. Additionally, the royal family's extravagant spending and the oil money exacerbated internal tensions in the Kingdom, which dramatically surfaced in 1979. The Grand Mosque in Mecca was under siege in 1979, highlighting the severity of internal tensions in Saudi Arabia as a result of the conflicting forces of modernisation, oil wealth, and Islam (Allison:2).

Coming to the Arab Uprising, Saudi Arabia after the ouster to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak issued a 10.7 billion dollars of social welfare package for its citizens (Osorio & Soares) This package included wage increases for public employees, new jobs, and loan exemption programmes. The sum of the payouts reached 37 billion dollars by the end of March, 2011 (ibid). King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia announced an additional 93 billion dollars in social spending the same year continuing the pattern (ibid). While a significant portion of this money went toward the building of 500,000 new homes, the remainder was used to raise the salary of public sector employees and provide concessions in the areas of welfare and education. In fact, there was also a one-time incentive for state employees that amounted to two months' worth of pay. With his welfare measures, King Abdullah hoped to mitigate the impact of the Arab Spring and stop economic woes from sparking unrest throughout the

Kingdom. Due to the high price of oil in the years prior, the Al Saud had access to significant financial resources that they might deploy to try to quell dissent within the Kingdom.

Despite this tradition of giving citizens money from the sale of natural resources, the amount of oil that can be exported is decreasing due to rising domestic consumption. This issue is made worse by the global oil market. The long-term effects of this are really serious. According to a projection

by the Saudi investment bank Jawla, Saudi Arabia would start running a budget deficit in 2014 and it will get serious by the year 2020 (Gause:12). Some of the major changes that was brought after the Arab Spring in the societal front of Saudi Arabia was women's rights started to become more liberal under Abdullah's reign as crown prince, when his grip on political decision-making started to become apparent. There are numerous recent instances of more progressive attitudes toward women; in fact, if one considers Abdullah's decision to reverse the ten-lashes sentence issued to a woman who drove a car as well as the policy of allowing women to vote in council elections starting in 2015, it can be said that Saudi Arabia tried to bring some changes in the Saudi Arabian society.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia and the United States' relationship has been impacted by the Al Saud's response to the Arab Spring, both internally and abroad. The Arab Spring has heightened tensions throughout the region, opening the door for proxy wars in Bahrain and Syria. Saudi Arabia's external approach in the wake of the Arab Spring has been inherently contradictory: Riyadh has worked to maintain the status quo throughout the region, assisting its friends in holding onto power while simultaneously attempting to stop the formation of pro-democracy Islamist movements in Egypt.

However, Saudi Arabia has endeavoured to do this through supporting opposition movements when the chance to weaken a regional rival and enhance the Kingdom's stature in the area has arisen. As a result of broader geostrategic considerations, relations with the United States have grown more difficult, simultaneously undermining American legitimacy and giving rise to an exception for Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The threat of instability within the Kingdom has

grown as a result of turmoil emerging in neighbouring states. Despite the Al Saud's many difficulties, the security system has prevented the creation of significant levels of public dissent outside of Shi'a areas. The current social compact in Saudi Arabia is unworkable, nevertheless, given the country's projected financial woes, rising budget deficits, changing nature of protest movements, and an educated middle class. Within the Kingdom, change is required to address these issues. In order to achieve this, the Al Saud should vigorously and seriously pursue the process of reforms.

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