

Saudi Arabia Between Royal Gestures and Demands for Political Reform

*Hussein Alalhq**

31 July 2011

It seems too early to accept the prevailing impression outside Saudi Arabia that the Kingdom has succeeded in overcoming the repercussions of the Arab Spring, after its adoption of an unprecedented policy of internal spending. It is difficult to take this seeming success for-granted in the medium and long term at least.

Following his return from a long journey of medical treatment to both the United States and the Kingdom of Morocco, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia ordered his government, during a TV address on 18 February, to allocate \$130 billion to a series of social projects, including salary increases in the public sector, a two-month once-off salary to both military and civil servants, grant of a two-month salary to all students in public universities, allocation of a monthly salary to the unemployed, the introduction of 60,000 police jobs in the Ministry of Interior, the establishment of 500,000 accommodation units throughout the Kingdom and an increase in home loans to a maximum of \$133.

It was clear from the King's address on that day that the Kingdom, which sits on a cash reserve of \$450 billion has decided to use this financial muscle to absorb the increasing internal tension which resulted in the deplorable social conditions of many segments of Saudi society, besides blocking the winds of change from abroad.

The timing of these financial grants or what is known locally as "royal gestures" – although the media has avoided referring to it as such this time – comes in line with calls by anonymous individuals through the internet and social networking websites urging people to take to the streets in protest demonstrations on 11 March, but nobody answered. Worthy of consideration, in the King's address on this occasion, is his commend of religious institutions, particularly the Board of Senior Scholars, members of the Armed Forces and the general public for not responding to such calls.

The question to be asked is: Have these huge financial grants by the government of the Kingdom managed to absorb the existing tension amongst the Saudis? The answer is: yes, and no. Yes, it could be said that the Kingdom was temporarily successful in absorbing part of the tension. However, it is difficult to assume that this type of treatment may constitute a solid edifice to survive the storms of change sweeping through the region for months. An example of the huge abyss between the offered financial gestures and the actual demand is the floods of applications for home loans that have poured in since the start on 24 June. Within just three weeks, the total number of applications reached 3.5 million. Given that one home loan is worth \$133,000, in a simple mathematical calculation, the Kingdom will need to spend more than its financial reserve to meet the demand for home loans only.

It seems that the level of temporary contentment, as a result of the government's move, has not gone so far beyond direct beneficiaries most of whom are public servants. In other words, large segments of society have not yet seen these "royal gestures", since not all the Saudis are working in the public sector. On the contrary, the Saudis would have been happier if the government could curb the galloping commodity prices which have burdened the people besides the increase of real estate and public services such as communications and electricity in a country experiencing high temperatures most of the year. Surprisingly, Saudi citizens have already borrowed from the banks to the value of SR200 billion in 2010.

Certainly, by spending internally such huge funds the government intended to create a counter shock against its citizens in the Arab Spring, in order not to let the protests spill over into its cities. These developments are taking place, while protests demanding democracy have already blown up the Southern and Eastern neighbours, Yemen and Bahrain respectively, besides Jordan which received, in the beginning of July, from Saudi a sum of \$400 million to enable her to "face all the challenges." Meeting demands for political reform

by multiplying spending is thus not meant for absorbing the tension, so much as it is meant for creating a counter shock against the winds of change.

People Between Politics and Economy

So far it is clear that the Saudi government has reacted to the Arab Spring and to its people's demand for political reform and democracy by pumping more money. Trying to understand the position of the ruling Saudi elite and their position towards the current situation in the country, it sounds like there is a common view among a segment in power that the cause of the crisis is the deterioration of the economic situation to many Saudis who are not essentially interested in the demands for political reform. Accordingly, this group is inclined more toward taking economic measures as we have seen. However, the other team is aware of the likely scale of demands for political reform and feels the aspiration of the Saudi elite to a constitutional monarchy governed by a modern constitution that includes separation of powers and free election of members of the Shura Council and local councils, but this team within the authority tends, instead, to evade meeting all these demands for reform by pumping financial grants here and there.

Perhaps the fundamental question here is: are the demands of the Saudis centred around improving the living conditions of vulnerable segments of the people? And, are the financial and social grants enough substitute for political reform in the Kingdom?

With reference to the many statements issued by Saudi elites in recent times, including hundreds of prominent activists, reformers, academics, businessmen, preachers, writers and intellectuals, it is clear that improving the living conditions is only a peripheral demand compared to the great political demands which if happened, would bring a complete change to the hierarchy of the political system in the country.

A quick review of the content of these statements reveals a unanimous agreement on the issue of constitutional monarchy that includes separation of powers, adoption of the principle of free elections in all legislative bodies from municipal councils, district councils to the Shura Council, reform of the judiciary, activation of the principle of control over public money, restricting security agencies by law, release of detainees and prisoners of conscience, freedom of expression and publication and allowing civil society organizations. Here is where the Saudi government began to adopt, out of context, economic solutions to fend off the effects of the Arab Spring on the inside, as seen by many and is far-away from meeting the ambitious of the Saudi elites.

The Prospects of Reform

Saudi Arabia appears poised today more than ever to contain the Arab Spring abroad on the one hand, and to contain demands for change and reform at home on the other hand, all at same time. While the Saudi policy toward the Arab revolutions works on several parallel lines, taking into account the nature and circumstances of each country, on the domestic level it looks coherent and solid towards the viewpoint that there should be no response to any demand for political reform at the moment. Perhaps the vision of the decision-making circles today is that being more stringent about the demands of reform at home is part of the requirements of containing the external threat which led to the fall of allied regimes; so that this response, according to this viewpoint, that should not be interpreted as a sign of weakness and that may push for more concessions at home and abroad.

It is important to note that the demands of the Saudi reformist elite are of a high-standard locally and at the level of GCC countries, which is unprecedented in the political history of

Saudi Arabia. Demand for constitutional monarchy, increase of popular participation, respect for the rule of law, reduction of corruption and building a representative political system that respects sectarian and regional peculiarities in the Kingdom, are all equal to the desire for the "overthrow of the regime" as in other countries, and thus realisation of these demands means establishing completely new mechanisms to replace the existing rule of the old regime.

In light of the above, the Saudi reformist elite today seem to be facing even a greater challenge of confronting a politically powerful authority, financially capable of establishing itself as a major regional power. The fall of the regime of Hosni Mubarak made Saudi Arabia compete face-to-face with two regional powers in the Arab neighbours, namely Iran and Turkey. While competition with Iran has taken a form of an open conflict in several arenas, it is more of a soft confrontation with Turkey. Within this regional context we can understand the call by Saudi Arabia on the kingdoms of Jordan and Morocco to join the GCC. The Saudi reformist elite are well aware that they are facing a government busy with arranging the regional stage to ward off any possible internal repercussions.

However, amid the outrageous behaviour of the Arab public who raised the slogan "the people want to overthrow the regime", the slogan of the Saudi elite remains "reform of the regime." Perhaps the only exception here is the call by anonymous individuals to take to streets in protest demonstrations in the Saudi cities on 11 March, whose slogan was "overthrow of the regime", but failed miserably. Otherwise, all the literature of the reformist Saudi elite with all its wide spectrum of liberal and religious - at home at least - reveals that these forces express their willingness to work under the roof of the current regime, and that all its demands are to reform the regime, instead of seeking to overthrow it. Accordingly the reformist forces see that the monarchy, by clinging to its ageing political traditions, and by being reluctant in its response to the demands of political reform, is too slow to recognise the enormous transformation taking place in the domestic arena.

So what's next? In the wake of a series of statements calling for political reform in the Kingdom, which were ignored by the regime, the Saudi reformist forces found themselves in a stalemate. After the release of the many announcements signed by prominent elites in Saudi society, prior to the King's speech on 18 March, expectations ran very high. People remained gazing at screens expecting the King to announce radical reforms in the political system. At that moment, expectations were modest concerning the adoption of the election of half the members of the Shura Council and full election of the members of the municipal councils, for which the law would decide the election of half of its members while the authority would designate the other half. However, the royal address on that day squandered all those expectations as the King's directions were limited to social benefits, financial grants and subsidies here and there. Taking this context into consideration, while the decision-making circles in the Kingdom are busy containing the repercussions of the Arab Spring, it seems hard to imagine the possibility of the Saudi government making radical political reform at home; therefore the Saudi interior arena will remain hostage to this state of apprehension due to absence of comprehensive national projects as a result of the official hesitation and caution about the vagueness of conditions that will result in revolutions and protests in several Arab countries.

Factors of Clash and the Necessities of Settlement

The reluctance of the Saudi government to make urgent radical political reforms and the continuing ambiguity of the situation on the regional level, may possibly push things in the country to the direction of the unknown. The Kingdom is currently experiencing circumstances that are exceptional by almost any standard; there is an undefined transitional phase within the government circles, which is expected to take its turn at any time in view of the factors of age as most of the Saudi decision makers today have passed their eighties,

which is why the level of expectation for them is lower. The most critical and uncertain factor in the transitional phase is the transfer of power from the old generation of the royal family to the second generation of youngsters.

On the other hand, observers have been sensing the features of a poised emergence of a reformist elite whose demands are nothing less than the adoption of constitutional monarchy in the country. To feel the height of the level of political discourse within the Saudi elite in various orientations, which include intellectuals, academics and jurists, it is quite sufficient to have a look at the level of debates raging in the virtual world through the social websites such as Facebook and the media. The Saudi e-space has become a competitor if not a practical alternative - in some times - to the official media which lacks the freedom of expression. You can easily find in cyberspace that the Saudi reformist elites are no longer hiding their desire for seeing radical reforms in the system the least of which is adoption of a constitutional monarchy that works outside the politically closed tribal space.

Here, we must pinpoint a major point of weakness in the Saudi reformist elites; absence of a coherent nationalist mass to demand reform unanimously and exercise a real pressure on the State. The forces demanding reform in the Kingdom are scattered throughout the map. Despite their huge numbers, they have so far failed to form a strong, one national block that deserves being considered. For that reason, these elites remained accessible by the security forces without little reaction. The absence of large conglomerates of the Saudi reform elites has availed an opportunity to the government of the Kingdom to trade-off political reform for economic reforms and has already succeeded in that progress, at least.

In the end we find ourselves in front of two generations which will form the parameters of competition on the future of the kingdom internally, one is the second generation of the royal family, who are eager to assume the helm of power soon, and the other is the reformist elite who demand constitutional monarchy.

A quick reading of the factors of clash and the necessities of settlement, between the ruling family and the reformist elite, may prompt adoption of the second option, which may preserve the rights of all parties and contributes to a peaceful distribution of power and wealth. Monopoly of absolute power is no longer acceptable to broad sectors of society. Thus, people are not accepting a power consolidated with a justice system which is part of the political establishment, free-handed security agencies, a religious authority that provides a thick religious cover, not to mention the complete media blackout, suppression of freedom of expression, prevention of the establishment of civil society organizations, the growing cases of discrimination on tribal and regional and sectarian grounds and worst of all, the blatant discrimination against women.

The rigidity of the political situation in the Kingdom today has become such a heavy burden on the government and the people that circles within the ruling family are forced to express distaste about it.

Therefore, it appears that factors of clash between the reformist political elites and the government are inevitable. This assumption is entrenched by the stumbling projects by King Abdullah to update the systems and make the country more open to modernity. The King's projects, including conferences of national dialogue, inter-religious dialogue, easing restrictions on women's participation and raising the ceiling of freedom of expression in the media, have opened great hopes and opportunities for peaceful change in the Kingdom until recently. However, all this has crashed - as the knowledgeable say - on the rocks of dispute due to swinging of the balance of power within the decision-making circles.

Conclusion

Saudi reformers believe that adoption of constitutional monarchy in the Kingdom will be less expensive than leaving the country moving toward the unknown, especially in light of the variables affecting the region. The recent changes in Tunisia and Egypt have proven at least that political systems cannot continue maintaining old alliances, and that these regimes can only capitalise on building true partnerships with their own people. This alone would be insufficient to save the country from the scourge of conflict and the move towards the unknown, especially in light of expected transitions whose characteristics remain unclear at the local and regional levels.

* *A Saudi Writer and political analyst*