IAI0723

DOCUMENTI IAI

SAUDI ARABIA: CHANGING PATTERNS OF POLITICAL MOBILISATION AND PARTICIPATION

by Steffen Hertog

Paper presented at the workshop on "The dynamics of change in the Arab world: Globalisation and the re-structuring of state power"
Rome, 23-24 February 2007

SAUDI ARABIA: CHANGING PATTERNS OF POLITICAL MOBILISATION AND PARTICIPATION

by Steffen Hertog

Introduction

This paper will pull together various strands of research on Saudi history and politics which I have been pursuing during the last four years, putting them into comparative perspective in the context of our project. Due to my historical-institutionalist take on Saudi politics, the paper's proposed structure is largely historical, focusing on the formation of political institutions in Saudi Arabia since the 1950s and how these institutions have shaped the responses of various political actors to crisis events since the 1990/91 Gulf war.

The main point I will make is that there has been much less change in the conduct of politics and state-society relations than in the republics under study. This does not mean that there has not been a certain convergence of systems in the Arab world – but this mostly is because the republics have shed their populist mobilizational structures, which Saudi Arabia never had. Recent moves to create ostensibly representative, formal-corporatist institutions in Saudi Arabia have not resulted in substantial change in the paternal, clientelist political strategies of the regime, which still define the essence of Saudi politics. The new corporatist institutions largely remain state-dependent and have little popular outreach – which makes them surprisingly similar to the formerly influential, but now largely disemboweled parties, unions and syndicates of other Arab states. One point in which Saudi Arabia paradoxically differs from both Morocco and the formerly populist republics is that it has been more successful in keeping up its distributional, inclusive socio-economic agenda – which has never been tied to political mobilization, however.

Sources and method

The sources for my paper consist of press and government material, interviews with "civil society" and regime representatives in Saudi Arabia as well as oppositional documents. I will also draw on the growing theoretically informed secondary literature on political change in Saudi Arabia, which is much more substantial now than only five years ago. In its historical part, the paper will draw on archival material from the Institute of Public Administration in Riyadh, the Public Record Office in Kew/London, US State Department documents, as well as the Mulligan Papers collection at Georgetown University and a number of other private paper collections.

My method is historical sociology, broadly speaking. I use the documentary record to trace the formation and change of social institutions, both formal and informal, which define Saudi politics. My main concern in the context of out project is with how these deeply rooted institutions delimit and shape current political change. The paper is not

wedded to a specific analytical mode of political economy, class analysis, political anthropology or "statist" analysis. I rather use the toolkit of political sociology liberally as it is applicable to the Saudi case.

The paper will start with a substantial historical section that maps out how the paternal clientelism of the Saudi polity was constructed and expanded between the 1950s and the 1980s, and how non-state social actors were fragmented or co-opted, leaving royalty and bureaucracy as main active constituents of the polity. I will then discuss a number of challenges to the regime, including non-state Islamist mobilization, and how these were dealt with through established structures of repression and, more importantly, co-optation. The empirical section of the paper will conclude with a discussion of recent corporatist initiatives by the regime, explaining how thus far they represent a modernization of the regime's political paternalism at best, but no substantial political change. The final section will put the Saudi case in comparative perspective, also briefly discussing other cases in the Gulf which are not addresses by out project in detail.

Saudi history as history of the Saudi state

The history of modern Saudi politics is to a large extent the history of the modern Saudi state and its elites. It was a small elite which created the early Saudi state through conquest and alliances with local notables in the 1920s and 1930s. Before the new state could become an arena for truly national politics, oil income skewed power relations between regime and society, allowing state elites to build quickly growing bureaucratic and distributive institutions without having to engage in negotiations with larger social groups.

Non-state actors grew increasingly dependent on state and regime patronage and became (or remained) politically fragmented. Never in modern Saudi history did social forces form or act independently of the state on a national level. Tribes were settled and co-opted, with the tribal leadership remaining relevant only on the local level. Those urban notables who were willing to cooperate with the regime preserved their local status, but usually became clients of the royal family, their range of action typically geographically circumscribed to their region of origin. Business was allowed to thrive, but in the shadow of the state, dependent on various forms of handouts and fragmented regionally. Between the 1950s and the 1980s, it was the regime and its distributional networks which largely defined Saudi politics.

Patterns and games of patronage: personalized

The system has been held together through patronage of two kinds: personalized and institutionalized. Personalized patronage can be captured through concepts of patron-client relations as developed in the anthropological literature – princes as patrons, smaller princes, bureaucrats or businessmen as clients; bureaucrats as patrons, aid recipients, small-scale shop owners or "paper pushers" as clients etc.

It is important is to remember that patronage is multi-layered in various ways and should not be reduced to simple dyadic relationships. Even if understood as complex phenomenon within larger institutional contexts, however, it remains defined by

inequality of resources and power, its small-scale nature and its capacity to undermine coalitions of equals. Tokens of exchange from the patrons' side can be jobs, bureaucratic protection and access, money, contracts and other state services. Clients reciprocate by spreading the good word about their patrons, representing their interests in lower reaches of the system, and gathering information for them. A larger clientage imparts social and political prestige.

In the absence of other political institutions or groupings, structures of personal patronage have often been the defining feature in the politics of the Saudi elite. Similarly, it has been important in bringing ever larger numbers of Saudis into the fold of the state as clients of growing numbers of princes, bureaucrats and other figures with access to state resources. It has also been important in defusing political crises, as the regime has tended to prefer co-optation of opposition over outright repression – although this was less so the case under rather harsh King Faisal than under his successors, who allowed former oppositionists back into the fold in the 1970s and 1980s, co-opting many a bright young Arab nationalist into the growing Saudi state apparatus.

Patterns of patronage: institutional

Institutional patronage has become increasingly important with this expansion of the Saudi state and its "swallowing" of large swathes of Saudi society in the boom decade of the 1970s. The term as used here denotes the formal structures of distribution, broadly defined, with which the increasingly complex Saudi state has been reaching out to various larger constituencies in society on a large scale and through formal means. It is an unequal exchange involving delimited groups of actors which, like personalized patronage, undermines the formation of autonomous horizontal groups. It usually involves jobs, subsidies and public services of various kinds. It can be intertwined with personal patronage on a small scale, but cannot be reduced to it.

The most important means of institutional patronage has been bureaucratic employment, which has contributed to the "statizing" of social groups and to the creation of new, fragmented social formations dependent on the state[1] – most notably the so-called 'hew middle class", which is not really a class at all, but an incoherent melange of various professional groups which are dependent on various state institutions. State employment has also helped to control and fragment tribes through employment in the National Guard. Similarly, Saudi ulama have been bureaucratized, not least by "granting" them a control over a variety of state institutions such as the Ministry of Justice, the moral police and significant parts of the education system – which gives them local institutional power, but also makes them subservient to state leaders.

One might object that subjects in many other political systems are playing comparable roles in state apparatuses and are benefiting from public services on a similar scale. What is more important, however, is the historical *proportion* of state and societal resources: Saudi societal resources have been much smaller than those of the state for a long time; for exactly the decades during which the rules of Saudi politics were written

[1] What Michael Ross calls the "group formation effect" of rentier states; Ross, Michael. 'Does oil hinder democracy?', *World Politics*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (April 2001), pp. 325-361.

and a national framework was established. Considering the very low development level of pre-oil Saudi society, relative dependence on the state has been much more pronounced than in any non-rentier state (and so has, incidentally, the clientelist entitlement thinking that goes along with sustained existence of direct and indirect state support).

The corollary of omnipresent, state-centred patronage in Saudi Arabia is the absence of large-scale social movements with any serious claim to autonomy from the regime. With distribution as the prevalent mode of economic interaction, conventional class formation was stymied.[2] Distributional states allow structures of kinship and primordial identities to flourish, often to the detriment of programmatic politics.

Leftist and nationalist parties in the 1950s and 1960s were weak and fragmented in social and regional terms. An incipient labour movement only existed in the Eastern Province, where US-owned oil company Aramco was the only entity to employ a sufficient number of workers in one place to enable unionization attempts. As these attempts had little national resonance, they were successfully crushed.[3] While a labour class never developed, the business classes of the various Saudi regions quickly grew dependent on state and royal patronage, as the size of state contracts outstripped any private profit opportunities. With old social actors losing their coherence and new groups growing up as creatures of the state, Saudi society in general remained fragmented and politically unmobilized. Independent organization of political interests was seldom demanded and never condoned. As far as the Saudi regime experienced crises in the 1950s and 1960s, these resulted from conflicts within the royal family rather than bottom-up pressures from society.

Different from all other socio-economic groups, business has developed some coherence as a class in recent decades, as sustained rent recycling has increased its autonomous resources and gradual managerial maturation has made it capable of catering to private demand and competing regionally.[4] It remains, however, a class without politics, as its limited demands are channeled through corporatist institutions such as chambers of commerce or economic policy commissions, keeping it separate from politics at large[5] – a feat that is easy to achieve considering the underdeveloped state of other forms of political mobilization.

Mobilizing against the paternal order

This is not to deny that Saudi Arabia has seen phases of salient oppositional mobilization. The fate of these movements however illustrates the resilience and

[2] Cf. Vandewalle, Dirk. *Libya since independence: oil and state building* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1998).
[3] Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: mythmaking on the Saudi oil frontier* (Stanford University Press 2006).
[4] Giacomo Luciani, 'Saudi Arabian business: from private sector to national bourgeoisie', in Paul Aarts, Gerd Nonneman (eds.), *Saudi Arabia in the balance: political economy, society, foreign affairs* (London: Hurst 2005), pp. 144-181
[5] Steffen Hertog, 'Modernizing without democratizing? The introduction of formal politics in Saudi Arabia', *International Politics and Society*, 3/2006.

flexibility of Saudi political paternalism more than the potential for broad oppositional coalitions.

The fully developed Saudi state saw its first political crises unfolding in late 1979: The uprising of Saudi Shiites in the Eastern Province and the occupation of the Holy Mosque in Mecca. Both, although they shook the ruling elites, were delimited problems which did not lead to political activation of the bulk of Saudi society. Many Sunni Saudis have little sympathy for Shiite claims for recognition. The absence of non-identitarian political ideologies in Saudi Arabia to which the Shiites could have attached their demands allows the regime to play divide-and-rule. The problem could be neatly quarantined in the Eastern Province, and – in classical Al Saud fashion – alleviated through increased expenditure on regional development, increasing institutional patronage.

The Juhayman revolt in Mecca delivered a deeper psychological blow to the rulers, but its very extremeness also underlined the isolation of Juhayman's group in Saudi society. The retrograde and millenarian nature of his movement might also be interpreted as the unwitting success of Saudi state-builders in suppressing broader-based, realistic oppositional ideologies – at least for the time being. Although the Mecca events made a dent in the Al Saud's credibility, they had no problems crushing the movement itself.

The 1980s, although a decade of economic crisis, were pretty calm in political terms. Political debate, as far as it occurred, tended to focus on cultural and moral issues, as a new generation of educated young Saudis questioned the relatively liberal attitudes of the socially mobile generation of the 1960s and 1970s. The locations for these debates were literary clubs and Islamic charities, not political organizations. These venues all were licensed and controlled by the state.

Despite this, the Islamically inclined intelligentsia (the "sahwa") did have a rather large leeway to organize in various cultural, educational and charitable institutions. Having no clearly defined socio-economic base, it still is the closest approximation to a "new middle class" movement Saudi Arabia has thus far seen – consisting of students, educated professionals and lower-rank Islamic scholars.

It was after the Gulf war of 1990/91 that a considerable component of the Islamic networks of the 1980s became politicized, openly demanding an Islamization of the public sphere and an Islamic foreign policy from the regime, as well as an end to the Al Saud state's corruption and favoritism. The emergence of the politicized sahwa from within formally state-controlled institutions (universities, charities etc.) revealed the ambiguity of the Saudi state's ubiquity: While its patronage reaches virtually all parts of Saudi society, it has in itself, in parts, become so amorphous and fragmented that the leadership cannot always control what happens in all of its sectors – specifically those sectors given some internal autonomy due to their specific role of reproducing the state's Islamic ideology, which requires minimal credibility and therefore freedom from too overt regime interference.

In Saudi Arabia more than perhaps anywhere else, politics often happens *within* the state. Positions within the fragmented state can give resources and opportunities to

actors, which explains the sahwa's relative organizational successes. However, actors within the state also tend to have more to lose. This puts constraints on them which groups outside of the state would not be subject to. It can force them to engage in unusual trade-offs – most saliently, they might decide to pursue their aims by having themselves co-opted; a process that tends to appear at best peculiar and at worst duplicitous to outside observers, but which can be entirely rational and socially acceptable in the Saudi context. Oppositional bargaining with the regime in Saudi Arabia can be intricate and functions according to rules that are different from both democratic-pluralist systems and the harsher autocracies in the rest of the Arab world.

Such bargaining arguably helps to explain why the sahwist oppositional movement which reached its apogee in 1994 fizzled out subsequently and has not been revived since. To be sure, the Saudi state deployed a measure of coercion to stop sahwist demonstrations, and the two most prominent sahwist leaders (Salman Al-Awdah and Safar Al-Hawali) were imprisoned for five years. At the same time, however, subtler means of pressure were used – such as threats to the public careers of activists – and incentives for cooperation were given. Remarkably, both leaders now have been more or less co-opted by the regime, taking part in regime-sponsored intellectual events and abstaining from anti-government rhetoric. Many other sahwist preachers now are firmly in the government camp, some of them enjoying considerable prestige and resources as regime-sponsored intellectuals. Once again, the Saudi leaders' paternal willingness to admit unruly subjects back into the flock has defused and divided opposition activism; as had happened several times before, be it with leftists or with errant princes. The Saudi state easily had enough resources to cope with an opposition that only had a vague program and a relatively thin socio-economic basis in the intelligentsia.

The corporatist reaction

King Fahd's regime also reacted with a number of institutional reforms in 1992/93: the promulgation of a "basic law", a new law on regional governance, and the creation of the appointed quasi-parliament, the Majlis Al-Shura. The basic law more or less institutionalized authoritarian rules of governance which had long since been in force informally, and the regional reform has had little impact on actual governorate structures. The Majlis was a more innovative reform step, although one that had been pondered at various occasions for more than 30 years. It also was a first significant step towards the institutionalization of public debate which has further progressed under Crown Prince and later King Abdallah.

As I have argued elsewhere, this institutionalization is best captured with the concept of state corporatism:[6] the state-led creation of various "interest groups" which are granted a representational monopoly by the state and are organized along non-competing, functional lines to take care of the various components of society, while ultimate control of politics remains in the hands of the regime, which alone has the license to bring the various interests together.

[6] Steffen Hertog, 'The new corporatism in Saudi Arabia: limits of formal politics', in: Abdulhadi Khalaf, Giacomo Luciani (eds.), *Constitutional reform and political participation in the Gulf* (Dubai: Gulf Research Center 2006), pp. 241-276

Saudi Arabia has not yet seen another phase of oppositional mobilization as in the early 1990s. It has however seen a number of political crises since 2001: the soul-searching induced by 9/11 and the domestic political violence since 2003 have emboldened Saudi intellectuals of various hues to once again ask for political reform. Again, Islamists (often with a sahwist background) have been the best-organized and persistent in their petitioning, although there have also been several petitions in which liberal and Islamist intellectuals joined hands to ask for a political opening.[7]

Corporatism has been the regime's main response. With Abdallah at the helm, the willingness to allow for controlled public debate has become much greater. At the same time, Abdallah's regime has worked towards channeling debate into state-controlled institutions, in line with his generally stronger reliance on formal mechanisms of governance (possibly a strategy to delimit the informal powers of other senior princes). Abdallah might also recognize that as Saudi society has grown larger, more complex, and more educated, it has become increasingly harder to accommodate all social interests through princely or bureaucratic clientelism.

Abdallah's regime has created various fora for various social interests: a "National Dialogue", which meets roughly twice a year to debate specific social and cultural problems, and has invited representatives of groups such as intellectuals, women, and national youth; one at a time. The state has also created a journalists' association, a human rights association, and a pensioners' association in the Eastern Province, while student and teacher associations have reportedly been mooted. Moreover, under Abdallah, the Majlis Al-Shura has been further extended. As it is explicitly recruited from various strata of functional elites (academics, businessmen, former bureaucrats, military, and some ulama), this body has a much stronger corporatist component than a conventional parliament.

With the exception of the Majlis, which has become a real forum for technocrats to debate policy issues in specific areas delimited by the regime, the above-mentioned exercises have aroused remarkably little interest in Saudi society. The state hand in orchestrating the new organizations might have been too visible, but at the same time, it also appears that large parts of Saudi society have little interest in formal, functional interest representation – the new bodies are not even seen as a chance to get a process of representation started. In the absence of a formal organizational tradition, the vast majority of Saudis seem to prefer pursuing their interests through established informal (and often polyfunctional) channels. Active identification as member of specific functional strata still seems alien to most Saudis. Needless to say, desultory attempts by dissident intellectuals to set up independent organizations have been suppressed by the regime.

The one area in which the new corporatism really reaches out beyond a small number of regime-sponsored client actors is in economic policy-making, where the regime has created several new channels for business interest representation. But although this finds considerable resonance in business circles – Chambers of Commerce by far the

[7] Stéphane Lacroix, 'Between Islamists and Liberals: Saudi Arabia's New Islamo-Liberal Reformist Trend', *Middle East Journal* vol. 58, no. 3 (Summer 2004), pp. 345-65.

oldest corporatist institutions with the largest outreach – it happens in a separate realm which is rather unconnected to the political and cultural debates that happen in the rest of society. The one political consequence this seems to have is to prevent the politicization of business. More generally, the within-case comparison of business with other corporatist initiatives shows that without an organizational tradition, top-down institutionalization of political debate is unlikely to have much resonance in a fragmented society used to operating in a clientelist fashion.

Summary and discussion

With the exception of business inclusion and the Majlis, recent corporatist initiatives have been a rather inconsequential exercise. At the same time, however, Saudi Arabia has not witnessed successful oppositional mobilization. Saudi dissidents are adrift, having no broad social base and independent national organizational structures to call upon. As the economy has been doing well for several years, not even the ritual, unspecific denouncements of regime corruption has much resonance for the time being.[8] Through the liberalization of national debate on cultural and social issues, the regime has managed to deflect public attention away from politics proper. Moreover, due to the polarization of Saudi Arabia between a broad conservative base and a smaller group of elite liberals (often with technocratic background), "culture wars"-type debates can be continued endlessly without having political consequences for the regime.

Comparative remarks for our project

Saudi Arabia has seen less substantial change in its political institutions than one would think looking at the impressive formal record of reform initiatives. With visible corporatist reform, but little change in actual participation and mobilization, it might represent the inverse of what is has happened in other Arab states: there, older corporatist institutions have seen substantial change – they have been undermined – but this has happened in a stealthy fashion.

Different from other Arab states, there has been no demise of "mass-based political organizations" in Saudi Arabia – the kingdom never had any. Conversely, Saudi Arabia's cautious political liberalization was not accompanied by "de-politisation and elitisation of political confrontation". Politics has always been an elite affair, although elites through their clientelist networks have always made great efforts to get a paternal sense of demands in society.

It is also difficult to discern a "higher level of intra-elite competition" in Saudi Arabia. The elite has of course grown in size, but the plural nature of princely fiefdoms is nothing new. Princes do compete for enlarged clienteles – also among the lower classes – but this kind of paternalism is as old as the Saudi state. Similarly, the growth of business resources and its influence on economic policy-making does not denote a new

[8] According to some strands of rentier state theory, an anti-corruption agenda is the only economic item which oppositions in rentier states can easily agree upon, as this agenda does not require specific class interests; cf. Luciani, Giacomo. "Allocation vs. production states: A theoretical framework", in Giacomo Luciani (ed.), *The Arab state* (London: Routledge 1990), pp. 65-84

center of political power; at least not one that is in open rivalry to other political institutions. If anything, it has become harder to carve out new niches in the Saudi elite since the early 1980s, as due to slower state growth, socio-economic mobility has decreased considerably.

With some delay, Saudi Arabia has gone through a measure of political liberalization like other Arab states, culminating in municipal elections in 2005. In this, however, it has been able to sell very modest steps as progress, as its point of departure in formal-institutional terms was that of an absolutist monarchy. It hence has had the advantage of being able to give tokens of liberalization which other regimes have already given long time ago. At the same time, the Saudi regime has not had to resort to repressive policies on the scale seen in Egypt or Syria in the 1980s and 1990s. It has maintained a paternal and co-optative political tradition which is rooted in the historical conservatism and gradualism of the Al Saud and has been enabled by oil income.

The clientelism which many decry as politically regressive in other Arab states has always been the dominant mode of politics in Saudi Arabia and has been widely accepted. In this sense, the kingdom has a comparative historical advantage in the way it conducts its politics, which it possibly has in common with other monarchies, which never promised mass-based, mobilizational politics.

Paradoxically, the distributional commitment of the Saudi regime is more resilient and serious than that in Arab republics. Wide-reaching distribution is of course made possible by oil income, but it has remained a very serious consideration even under strong economic pressures. Subsidy cuts tended to hit business and higher income brackets rather than lower strata, and as far as the latter were concerned, austerity measures were often repealed.

Although public employment guarantees are not given anymore, public services remain strongly subsidized, and social expenditure has recently increased more rapidly than any other type of expenditure. The lower and middle classes were always meant to be included, but never to be mobilized, and the regime still holds true to that. Different from other Arab states, intermediation through non-state elites has not increased in importance – intermediation of state resources through princes or notables is significant, but not new.

As it has not re-engineered its socio-economic basis, the regime also did not have to de-ideologised its discourse very much: it can by and large stick to its Islamic-conservative guns, which continue to befit the paternal monarchy. The recent opening away from rigid Wahabi discourse is a limited phenomenon and one that is rooted in Saudi Arabia's specific security problems and Abdallah's attempts to obtain reformist credentials.

One development that other Arab states and Saudi Arabia have in common is that only Islamists have come to constitute a serious opposition. The socio-economic base of the broader networks of Saudi Islamists engaged in petitioning and peaceful protest is comparable to that of the Muslim Brotherhood in other states: students, academics and middle-class, educated professionals are strongly represented. What Saudi Islamists

lack, however, is backing by a strong Islamist bourgeoisie – which might help to explain their lack of oppositional perseverance. Moreover, they do not garner legitimacy from the provision of social services to the lower classes; certainly not on the scale witnessed in poorer countries such as Egypt, Palestine, Morocco etc. The Saudi state has not failed sufficiently to provide space for this.

This paper does not argue that state-society relations in Saudi Arabia are completely different from those in other Arab states. The point is slightly more complicated: The way politics is nowadays being conducted in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Arab world – in a authoritarian-clientelistic fashion, with formal-corporatist institutions little more than embellishment – is pretty similar. What differs are the trajectories through which the different states arrived at this set-up. The different histories in turn explain why the Saudi regime appears more comfortable with this style of politics: It did not have to go through a crisis of legitimacy and the painful dismantlement of formal-inclusive institutions to reach it, but had adopted it as the natural form of politics of a rentier monarchy. Therefore its new corporatism is not suffering from a full-blown legitimacy crisis, but rather from a (delimited) crisis of irrelevance.