

RS/1980 - 55/STAFF

ISTITUTO AFFARI INTERNAZIONALI - ROME - ITALY

CENTRE FOR POLITICAL & STRATEGIC STUDIES - CAIRO - EGYPT

DEUTSCHES ORIENT-INSTITUT - HAMBURG - W. GERMANY

How stable is the political system of
Saudi Arabia?

Dr. Thomas KOSZINOWSKI

July 1980

How stable is the political system of Saudi Arabia?

The Saudi Arabian society is presently being influenced by two prevailing determinants which, in a certain degree, are incompatible: (a) the Islam as the all-dominating basis of public and private life on the one hand and (b) the western oriented economic development and modernisation which in many respects endanger the values based on the Islam, by exerting a negative influence or by being in contradiction with them on the other hand.

Since the oil price increase in 1973 and the resulting economic boom, the signs of a crisis within Saudi society which can be traced back to the 1950s when the modernisation of the country gained impetus, have come to the fore. This crisis is particularly serious since in Saudi Arabia the process of transformation commenced rather suddenly and expanded rapidly in contrast to other Arab states like Egypt or Syria where it extended over a much longer period of time.

While other countries had opened themselves to western influence at earlier time already, Saudi Arabia which had guarded itself to the very ^{end} and against foreign influences was practically unprepared when it become confronted with the adverse side effects of modernisation and industrialisation.

The adaptation to modern conditions and the adoption of western technology and thus of western modes of behaviour, too, at least to a certain extent, were hampered by the fact that in Saudi Arabia, on account of the prevailing Wahhabite belief, a particularly rigorous form of the Islam which rejects everything alien is existent. Furthermore, the leadership of the country is aiming at maintaining the Islamic-oriented social order and at preventing negative influences to gain predominance and an endangerment of these values by western modes of behaviour as a consequence of industrialisation or modernisation. The Islam and traditional values are not allowed to be violated.

The economic development and the growing influence from abroad

exerted either by the numerous migrant workers or the close contact of many Saudi students and businessmen with foreign countries have already weakened the forms of behaviour moulded by the Islam. Even more serious is the fact that at the outside the impression is given of the old values still being authoritative while in private life, at least in the upper classes, western customs have long gained access.

The contrast between the advocates of an easier application of Islam who, of course, cannot voice their demands in the public, on the one hand, and the proponents of a vigorous Islam on the other hand, are the real source for tensions within the Saudi Arabian society. In the course of the so-called re-Islamisation which also plays a certain role in Saudi Arabia, the followers of the orthodox Islam will gain ground. The representatives of the government and the Royal House who officially have to be the guarantor and guardian of the "orthodoxical belief" are taking efforts not to give the exponents of the orthodox Islam a pretext for criticizing the policy of the Government. In any case, the Government, i.e. the Royal House, desists from issuing laws or supporting trends which might give the impression that it encourages the westernization or an impairment of Islam.

Although every Saudi is obliged to adhere to the Islamic commandments and nobody could dare to shake them, everybody knows that in private life these laws are not always observed. Western oriented Saudis drink alcohol, enjoy themselves in nightclubs abroad and live in luxury. They hate the behaviour of the religious zealots whom they despise for their alleged bigotedness. As also the integrity of some members of the Royal House is not beyond doubt, these are vulnerable to the attack of the orthodox circles. The occupation of the Great Mosque in Mecca in November 1979 was pointed particularly to the moral viciousness of the upper classes, but also to a policy favouring westernization and industrialization which are considered the root of all evil.

One of the most important consequences of the economic and social development is the advent of a new class which stands out against the remaining population because of its high income and its in-

fluence in business (as managers of large industrial enterprises) or its activity as professors at the numerous new universities, as lawyers etc. This class automatically aspires to gain political influence, too. However, this aspiration cannot be realized since the special structure of Saudi Arabia concentrates all power on the King or the House of the Sa'ud. The most important offices in the state are reserved to the members of the Royal House, as for instance the office of the prime minister or of a governor. This problem is seen by the ruling family as well. At the beginning of the 60s King Faisal already promised the introduction of a constitution and a Shura, a kind of parliament, within the framework of democratization. After the death of King Faisal, these ideas were taken up again by Crown Prince Fahd, especially after the occupation of the Great Mosque in Mecca. Unfortunately no concrete steps have been taken so far and it must be assumed that decisive measures in this direction will be implemented only under pressure. The leadership might eventually be prepared to make concessions when it could be too late already.

The restriction of power to the House of Sa'ud also affects another important feature of domestic policy. The House of Sa'ud is regarded as the representative of the Bedouin tribes of the Najd, i.e. of Central Arabia. The Bedouin tribes are in many respects different from the population in the coastal regions of the Red Sea, of the towns of Jidda, Mecca and Medina, which have been sedentary from time immemorial and as traders and merchants have been oriented outwards and been open for alien influences. They joined the state of Ibn Sa'ud only in 1932. Naturally, the "Hijazis" feel themselves superior to the Bedouins in regard of culture. Under Sherif Husain of Mecca attempts were being made after the first World War to extend the rule to the whole peninsula. Ibn Sa'ud brought the Hijazis under the sway of the Bedouin tribes instead. This antagonism has by no means subsided. The last demand of the Hijazis is an increased participation in power. Certain groups frankly reject the predominance of the tribes and aim at terminating the supremacy of the House of Sa'ud. In the case of interior tensions this antagonism could gain momentum. The occupation of the Great Mosque and the fact that its preparations remained hidden imply that separatist forces in the

Hijaz were given support by leading circles.

Saudi Arabia is endangered by "progressive" ideologies, as are other states with a traditional structure of power. At the time of Nasser, Saudi Arabia was a preferred aim of Egyptian propaganda. The Ba'th Parties in Syria and Iraq, too, had for many years disparaged the Government of Saudi Arabia and the Royal House as the exponent of Arab reaction. But even if these open attacks have by and large ceased because Saudi Arabia on account of its heavy economic weight is sought as a partner at least on a governmental level, the system is still being combatted by radical political groups, especially also within the PLO.

If the social crisis became more and more grave, those ideas in particular would become dangerous for the existence of the Royal House and thus of the present social order. The growing number of domestic and migrant workers might become susceptible to such ideas which does not seem to be the case yet. In spite of all the riches there are enough discontent persons, though perhaps not being as needy and poor as in other Arab countries. But the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a small minority, especially of the members of the Royal Family, gives enough grounds for envy and malevolence, as does corruption and moral viciousness.

In this connection the army gains in importance, too. While the armed forces formerly when they consisted only of Bedouins could absolutely be relied upon, this is nowadays only true for the National Guard which is mainly composed of Bedouins and which is in a certain way responsible for the interior security. Today the regular armed forces which by the introduction of modern weapons are in a growing measure dependent on qualified and trained staff, also constitute a centre for oppositional activities, as was revealed by the attempted putsch of the air force in 1969.

It cannot be denied that there are enough issues of conflict in Saudi Arabia which are potentially existent and which might become inflamed anytime when the situation aggravates and sufficient factors accumulate. The Saudi Government has hitherto

acted in a relatively prudent and circumspect manner. Thanks to its structure - important decisions are the result of a comprehensive thinking process within the various groups of the Family Council and which are constituting a compromise - it is able to react flexibly. It is by no means autocratic as was the rule of the Shah in Iran. In the future the security and stability will to a high extent depend on the progress of democratization which appears unavoidable, and on the willingness to share power with other sections of the population.

For the time being, the Saudi regime does not seem to be in danger. In the medium or long term, however, violent changes cannot be ruled out, that is to say if the leadership will not succeed in creating an outlet for the new classes striving for power and in delegating power to them. At least these classes must be given the impression that they are not precluded from power.

SECRET

BIBLIOTECA

n° Inv. 10445
31 MAG. 1991

!a! ISTITUTO AFFARI
INTERNAZIONALI - ROMA