



The Limits Of Saudi Reform

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Just how far-reaching are Saudi Arabia's reforms? These days, there is unbridled optimism in official Washington over what are widely seen as sweeping social and economic changes taking place in the historically-stagnant Kingdom.

At first glance, Saudi Arabia does indeed appear to be on the march. Since 2016, when he formally unveiled his National Transformation Plan, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman - better known as MbS - has presided over an ambitious initiative to overhaul the national economy and Saudi society.

Most visibly, this has entailed significant upgrades to the status of women, including the long overdue rights to drive, to attend public sporting events, and to participate more fully in business. Simultaneously, the Kingdom has begun reducing the pervasive - and costly - culture of economic subsidies which predominated in past years. The Saudi government likewise has commenced a serious effort to reorient the country away from its current, deep dependence on energy exports toward a truly post-oil economy.

What the reforms haven't entailed, however, is a real rethink of the underlying tenets of the Saudi state. In multiple speeches and pronouncements, MbS has made clear that he has no plans to abandon the Kingdom's creed, or to repudiate the austere Wahhabi strain of Islam that serves as the country's organizing ideology. Nor has he given any indication that he intends to reign in the main communicators of that radical message: the country's powerful conservative preachers.

The most notable of these is Mohammed al-Arifi, a Wahhabi theologian who, with more than 21 million followers, is a bona fide celebrity on social media platform Twitter. (Al-Arifi currently ranks 88th among all Twitter users worldwide in terms of number of followers - beating out household names like Oscar-winning actor Leonardo DiCaprio and the Dalai Lama.) Al-Arifi, and others like him, remain effectively untouchable in Saudi Arabia, both because of their extensive base of support and due to their deep societal influence. And because they are, their extreme views continue to proliferate inside the Kingdom, and to resonate far beyond its borders.

Indeed, at least so far, Riyadh's energies have been directed overwhelmingly toward just two key priorities.

On an economic level, the House of Saud is attempting to reverse the country's slide into what increasingly appears to be real and lasting recession. Over the past several years, economic growth in the Kingdom has constricted significantly, due in no small measure to the declining price of world oil. Last year, too, the Kingdom's growth was decidedly lackluster, defying International Monetary Fund predictions of an "economic rebound." All of which has reinforced the growing conviction among Saudi officials that, at long last, it's no longer possible to put off diversifying their energy-centric economy.

Politically, meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's heir-apparent has deftly moved to root out potential challengers to his eventual ascension to the throne via a highly selective anti-corruption drive. To date, the purge initiated by MbS and his National Anti-Corruption Commission has claimed as many as 500 Saudi royals, who have been detained and stripped of assets in what could best be described as an opulent Middle Eastern version of house arrest.

As of yet, however, the Kingdom hasn't turned its attention to softening its state ideology, or to curbing its persistent practice of exporting those exclusionary ideas abroad.

This is the reason why, by and large, regional states hold a far more skeptical view of Saudi reforms than the one which now predominates in the West. From the perspective of more than a few of the Kingdom's neighbors, everything MbS has done is tactical, and easily reversible. At least so far.

None of this means that the changes now taking place in Saudi Arabia should be discounted or dismissed. But for Washington, optimism about Saudi reforms must be tempered by the understanding that meaningful change can't be measured by level of activity alone. Rather, it also needs to be judged by the effectiveness of that activity in steering the Kingdom toward a new - and more constructive - ideological path. And on that score, the jury is still out.

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