



Reforming Saudi Arabia's Religious Establishment

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Since King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud's accession, coupled with the appointment to Crown Prince of Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), the pace of change in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) — socio-economic and political — has been accelerated and the Land of the Two Holy Mosques (Mecca and Medina) is redefining its relationship to religion. For decades the ruling Al-Saud family has lived in harmony with the official religious establishment, however, the clerics' ultra-conservative views coupled with their acquired influence, could hinder the progress envisaged by the emergent leadership. Consequently, MbS has increased pressure on extremist clerics and on those who refuse to support the government's direction. It is therefore vital to explore the recent transformation of the relationship between Saudi Arabia's religious establishment—both official and unofficial—and the political elite as well as the MbS strategy for keeping the clerics in check.

TRADITIONAL RELATION BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND CLERICS

Traditionally, Saudi Arabia's government used to foster relations with ultra-conservative clerics by appointing them to the official religious bodies notably: the Council of Senior Scholars (CSS), the Kingdom's chief religious body, headed by the Grand Mufti, the country's most senior religious and legal figure, coming from the leading religious family of Muhammad ibn Abd Al-Wahhab's descendants, the Al Ash-Sheikhs; the Committee on Islamic and Judicial Affairs of the Shura Council; and the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV). For decades the Al-Saud family had a symbiotic relationship with the Kingdom's official religious establishment. Since the members and leaders of religious bodies are both appointed and removed by the King, they depend completely on the government for their incomes as well as powers. In turn, the clerics have provided the government with support and legitimacy. The origins of the alliance between Al-Sauds and Wahhabis can be traced back to the 18th century when Muhammad ibn Saud, founder of the first Saudi state and the House of Saud, and Muhammad ibn Abd Al-Wahhab, founder of Wahhabism, joined forces.

The religious ideology distinguished the Al-Sauds from other clans and generated more support. Together, the Wahhabis and the Al-Sauds, not only built the Kingdom but also continued to maintain order through Sharia law—Islamic legal codes that govern daily life. Implementation was enforced by the powerful CPVPV aka: the religious police. Clerics promoting more liberal views of Sunni Islam faced various punishments, including imprisonment, while those practising any other religion could have faced persecution.

The unofficial religious establishment has no official powers and its members have somehow acted against the government policies—for instance, by public criticism of the government, political activism (including violence), etc. Many of the well-known representatives, re: Salman Al-Awda, Awad Al-Qarni, Ali Al-Omary, imprisoned in September 2017, belong to the Sahwa movement—reportedly linked to the banned Muslim Brotherhood—which has been calling for radical political change since the 1990s. The unofficial clerics have limited options for reaching out to the audience and for that purpose they have retreated to social media, attracting millions of followers, and are usually more well-known outside the Kingdom than the official state-backed clerics.

Despite the predominance of Sunni Islam, declared as the Kingdom's official religion, the Eastern province and the South of the Kingdom contain minorities of Shia Muslims—Twelvers, Zaydis and Seveners. Shia clerics are not part of the official religious establishment and they largely oppose Saudi Arabia's leadership on sectarian lines. Given the influential position the Shia clerics enjoy in their communities, they are often leaders of political mobilisation movements against the government. However, Shia clerics and activists are closely monitored by the government and have been often targeted for their links to Iran, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah, particularly in the town of Awamiyah.

TIGHTENING THE GRIP

Since assuming power, MbS has worked towards introducing a more moderate version of Islam in Saudi Arabia and untying the government from the previously tolerated, sometimes promoted, ultra-conservative clerics. To ensure compliance of, and avoid a backlash from, such clerics, MbS intensified surveillance efforts of religious authorities while clipping their powers. The religious police lost, for instance, their arresting competences and the government began to closely monitor issuing fatwas. Given the fading support from society-at-large, the imminent threat of punishments for non-complian-

ce and MbS' newfound powers, the official Wahhabi clerics eventually began publicly promoting the reforms. The shift in prominent official religious figures' rhetoric, including the Grand Mufti, became visible particularly over the past year, when they voiced support for introducing entertainment and allowing women to drive, while a year ago many denounced it as immoral and haram (forbidden under Islamic law). Those who maintained their ultra-conservative rhetoric and were either removed from their posts or left there, depending on their threat potential. While the ultra-conservative clerics are being accommodated or removed, the previously penalised liberal clerics have been progressively appointed to various religious bodies and promoted in the state media.

Equally important, MbS increasingly controls the unofficial religious figures and deploys some of them in promotion of his reforms in exchange for being omitted from the rounds of arrests of extremists and religious dissent. One such case is Mohammed Al-Arefe, an influential extremist cleric with large social media audience, who became an ally of MbS and now uses his platform to promote the reforms in exchange for not being jailed. The clerics who continued to oppose the government's policies and support for terrorist organisations and/or the Muslim Brotherhood were imprisoned—notably the aforementioned controversial Sahwa figures—while some less influential clerics were only punished by a ban on social media.

PAVING THE PATH TO MODERATE ISLAM

MbS made clear that he will not tolerate opposition to his reforms, neither from his family members nor religious authorities. He promoted dialogue to persuade the ultra-conservative clerics to moderate their views. While some may maintain their negative stance towards the reforms, only those who would pose serious threat and incite violence were punished. In reality, media remains under scrutiny by the government, ensuring that clerics who oppose government policies and promote less-than-moderate views, are prevented from appearing on television, radio or news and their social media accounts are shut down. In turn, more liberal clerics are pushed to appear in the media to promote previously taboo ideas such as religious tolerance, women empowerment etc.

The future of Saudi religious relations remains unclear. Religious reactionary forces are unlikely to ever wield significant power again. Change in all societies is inevitable and Saudi Arabia under the leadership of King Salman and MbS is no exception to the rule.

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