



The Prince of Change: Is MbS transforming the Saudi society?

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Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), has committed himself to radically reforming the Kingdom's economy and socio-cultural life. His ambitions are manifested in the 'Vision 2030' project, which includes unprecedented reforms for economic diversification, and massive initiatives in the modernisation of public life in the Kingdom. This article lays out the many reforms the Prince has initiated, in his short time in power, and the way in which Saudi society is quickly transforming.

Until recently, unmarried men and women could not socialize in public in Saudi Arabia. For women, disregarding the socially enforced hijab dress code, or simply wearing nail polish, risked getting arrested and fined by the mutawa, the feared morality police, which exerted almost unrestricted power in the name of public ethics (Omran, 2017). Patrolling the streets and public spaces, the mutawa was notorious for its strict enforcement of sex segregation and often made headlines for extreme, violent chastising of disobedience of the strict Wahhabi moral code. MbS significantly curbed the religious police force's powers; abolishing their right to pursue or arrest suspects and only allowing them to refer the accused to the regular, secular, police. The change is a major liberation to the young Saudi population—the average age in the Kingdom is just under 30 years—who have long opposed the harsh ruling of the mutawa on Saudi streets.

The 32-year old Crown Prince has also strategically interwoven economic and social reforms in Vision 2030. Amid constant fluctuation of the oil prices, and as the world moves increasingly toward more sustainable energy sources, economic diversification has become a necessity for Saudi Arabia. In his plan, MbS suggests using social reforms to increase domestic spending in the country and develop potentially profitable industries that, until now, were restricted by the ultra-conservative religious elite. Under MbS' supervision, public concerts, including mixed-sex events, have been introduced, and last year saw the first performance ever of a female artist in the country. In April 2018, the country's first cinema opened in Riyadh—after a 35-years-long religious ban was

lifted—with the showing of US blockbuster ‘Black Panther’ (Kalin, 2018). The same month, the country’s first Fashion Week was held, featuring international designers, as well as showcasing local talent (Dadouch, 2018). In January, women attended a football game for the first time, with all stadiums set to be able to host female audiences from next season on (Shaheen, 2018).

These historic developments reflect the top down reformation of Saudi’s conservative society, which had long been dominated by strict Wahhabi religious elites supporting al Saud. (TIME, 2018) (McDowall, 2014). The risk of alienating religious leaders eclipses prospective profits the reforms are set to bring, with estimates that the Saudi cinema sector alone could be worth \$1 billion in the future (Lang, 2018). In the past, thousands of Saudis flocked to neighbouring Bahrain or Dubai and even jetted to Lebanon, to spend billions on entertainment and recreation in the more liberal countries (Agence France-Presse, 2018). The development of a domestic entertainment sector will enable Saudi Arabia to keep money in the Kingdom, and increase household spending on cultural and entertainment activities inside the Kingdom from 2.9% to 6% (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). The major investments in the field also aim to attract foreigners with extravagant, larger-than-life projects. A case in point is Entertainment City, a 334 sq. km, multibillion dollar project in Qiddiya, a theme park that will attract 17 million visitors by 2030 (Agence France-Presse, 2018).

In late April 2018, Saudi Arabia hosted the ‘Greatest Royal Rumble,’ a WWE wrestling event that drew some 60,000 spectators and earned WrestleMania 14.1 million in revenue (Konuwa, 2018). The event, which included some of the biggest global wrestling stars, such as the Undertaker, Roman Reigns and Chris Jericho, was attended by a mixed audience, albeit only allowing male wrestlers to participate (Konuwa, 2018).

In addition to the improvement of public perceptions and the economic gains it will bring, the entertainment industry will largely be welcomed by millions of young Saudis, who currently lack leisure activities and opportunities to channel creativity and energy, which has been connected to youths gravitating toward delinquent, unhealthy behavior (Al-Anazi & Al-Shamli, 2011).

Furthermore, one of the stated aims of Vision 2030 is to increase women’s participation in the workforce from 22% to 30% (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). The diversification of the economy will ultimately create jobs in the private sector and foster an environment for innovation and entrepreneurship, while aiming to increase SME contribution to the GDP to 35%, up

from 20% by 2030. Should these objectives be achieved those will especially benefit women, who make up more than 50% of Saudi Arabia's university graduates but have been unable to secure a similar share in the job market.

Generally, the reforms for women have been among the most long-awaited and publicised; first and foremost, of course, the end of the ban on women drivers, which will go into effect from June 2018. MbS also angered clerics when he declared that the Quran, while it did call for women to dress modestly, did not require them to wear the black abaya (gown) or head cover, as strict social codes currently prescribe (Spencer, 2018). He went on to state that men and women were, 'absolutely,' equal, a groundbreaking statement coming from a Saudi Crown Prince (Hubbard, 2018). Through softening the discourse on such matters, MbS is paving the way for future reforms in his bid to returning the Kingdom to 'moderate Islam that is open to all religions, traditions and people around the globe.' (BBC, 2017)

Statements and policies like these are not only aimed at internally empowering moderates and restricting extremists in powerful positions, they are part of an ongoing Saudi campaign to change the public perception of the Kingdom globally. MbS wrapped up an extensive three week-long tour of the United States last month, in which he spoke to President Donald Trump, as well as a multitude of investors and strategic partners, among them UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, Michael Bloomberg, Bill Gates, Tim Cook, Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos and Oprah Winfrey (Brimelow, 2018). As part of this diplomatic offensive, Saudi Arabia begun issuing its first tourist visas this year, including for women (Townsend, 2018).

Despite the many positive developments, the recent May 2018 arrests of ten prominent activists for women's rights have cast a shadow over the new reforms, drawing a critical appeal from the UN Human Rights office . (Reuters Staff, 2018). As these allegations develop, it is not yet clear if MbS is directly responsible for the arrests– or to what extent they may be a concession to appease the conservative Wahhabi establishment– it is undeniable that MbS has initiated an era of extensive change in a country that is known for resisting just that–change. The future will show the extent to which the reforms will hold. Until then, the all-encompassing reforms, and the changes already visible in Saudi society, speak for themselves.

We at the Euro Gulf Information Centre support the changes underway in Saudi Arabia under Vision 2030 and will closely monitor the developments in the Kingdom.

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