



MEDirections Roundtable - 30th April 2019

The Politics of Religious Reform in MBS's Saudi Arabia

with Stephane Lacroix (SciencesPo, Paris)

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On 30 April, Dr. Stephane Lacroix presented a MEDirections roundtable on the politics of religious reform in Mohamed Bin Salman's (MBS) Saudi Arabia. This timely roundtable expanded on the various ways in which MBS's policies, particularly towards the religious establishment, have affected the dynamics of power in Saudi Arabia. With MBS falling outside of the archetype of Saudi leaders, his strong-man cult of personality, coupled with his liberalization of certain aspects of the Saudi domestic scene, Lacroix elucidated Saudi Arabia's political background and its conceptual shifts and moves. In short, MBS's reforms in the religious sphere represent a fundamental renegotiation of the way in which politics has been done in Saudi Arabia for decades, in terms of both a move from collective to individual decision making, and the relationship between the clergy and the royal family.

To get a better grasp of the gravity of these changes, Lacroix detailed at length the intricate marriage between the Saudi Dynasty and the Wahhabi religious establishment in the conception of the Saudi Kingdom. In short, Muhammad bin Saud and Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab in the mid-18th century established a power sharing system, whereby the former would rule as a political elite, while the latter would define religious norms, enforced by clerics onto society. The conservatism of the Wahhabi doctrine is best captured through a certain principle of *fiqh* which the doctrine greatly emphasizes and which Lacroix aptly summed up: not only should you ban what is banned by God, "but you should ban the means to commit what is banned – if licit means could lead to sin, then it should be banned". For instance, women driving was previously banned because clerics thought it could lead to sin. Under this previous arrangement, both segments would rule collectively.

In April 2016, while King Salman (his father) was gradually letting him take center stage, MBS removed the religious police's powers of arrest, decreasing the visibility of Islam in the day to day of Saudi Arabia. This move, coupled with the rise in his domestic popularity as a result of the Yemen war, helped increase MBS' power in the Saudi government, leading to his appointment as Crown Prince in July 2017. This was a surprising decision as previously, his elder brothers and other members of the monarchy, such as Mohamed Bin Nayef – a US favourite –, were all deemed better suited for the role of Crown Prince.

A watershed, according to Lacroix, was October 2017, when in an interview with the Guardian MBS stated that “[Saudi Arabia is] simply reverting to what we followed – a moderate Islam open to the world and all religions.” According to Lacroix, such a political move was in the works when considering MBS’s rise up the Saudi political hierarchy, suggesting that one of the remaining frontiers to near-complete control was the role of Islam and the clergy. MBS’ removal of the religious police’s power of arrests was significant because it directly diminished some of the power and autonomy of the clerics, and their collective rule over society.

In light of how the clergy have not spoken out in his favour (or not as much as he would like), in order to generate more public appeal MBS has thus embarked on an intense PR campaign, as he attempts to manipulate the narrative of his ascent to suggest that the clergy are wholeheartedly supporting him. He has, in turn, appointed new, younger clerics. Moreover, since the 70s there’s been a rise in independent clerics, outside of the purview of the clergy. Within these smaller religious circles, the religious culture is somewhat different as they have more politicized tendencies. Since November 2017, many independent clerics who have criticized MBS have been more severely repressed and arrested as they have been accused of “supporting terrorist organizations”.

Furthermore, through his introduction of concerts, music and cinemas to Saudi Arabia, MBS has directly contested prohibitions and restrictions in store by Wahhabi clerics – the fact that he established a General Entertainment Authority further demonstrates this point. In turn, the revocation of the ban on women driving has also challenged the prevailing order in the country. All of this is part and parcel of MBS’s much broader 2030 vision, to transform Saudi Arabia through a series of socio-economic reforms.

When bearing this in mind, it becomes increasingly clear that MBS wants to undo this system of collective governance and transform Saudi Arabia into a modern authoritarian state, moving away from the pre-modern model of dynastic rule and political paternalism that used to prevail in the Kingdom, in ways similar to what Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed (MBZ) did in the UAE ten years earlier. Lacroix argues that this objective doesn’t stem from ideological reasons. Rather, it derives, first, from his personal political ambitions and, second, from his desire to enforce new socio-economic changes which in MBS’ view Wahhabism directly prevents. There is an economic rationale at play, as indicated further by his retaking of many fiefdoms and the infamous Ritz Carlton affair.

The combination of this and the increasing populist and nationalist sentiment MBS has consolidated through the war in Yemen, has led to the creation of a new aggressive nationalist persona. To Lacroix, this new nationalist identity is a great departure from the previous construction of the Saudi self, as previously Saudi identity was conflated with both its monarchist tendencies and the Wahhabi doctrine.

By Christopher Frattina della Frattina