

## Opinion

## Saudi Arabia is using Canada to test a wobbling international order

But it's far from a foregone conclusion that liberalism has completely lost its global ideological hold

[Sreeram Chaulia](#) · for CBC News · Posted: Aug 13, 2018 4:00 AM ET | Last Updated: August 13, 2018



The assumption behind this diplomatic tussle seems to be that the liberal world order has already caved in, and authoritarian governments now have untrammelled freedom to crush dissent at home and browbeat opponents abroad. (Bandar Algaloud/Saudi Royal Court/Reuters)



The unusual fit of rage with which Saudi Arabia reacted to Canada's routine criticism of the kingdom's human rights situation is a reflection of not just the nature of the current regime in Riyadh, but also of the transitory world order in which we are now living.

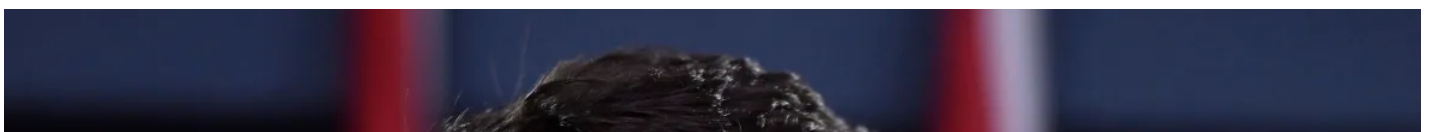
The diplomatic row, wherein the petulant Saudis have recalled their ambassador from Ottawa and threatened to pull out thousands of their [students](#) and [patients](#) from Canadian universities and hospitals, is emblematic of a liberal international system that is wobbling, though it still has proponents.

By now, it is evident that the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is a hardliner who does not brook any dissent against the kingdom's monarchical absolutism. His loosening of social restrictions on Saudi women and imposition of restraints on the conservative Wahhabi clerical establishment impressed many, but political persecution of activists has simultaneously increased since the 32-year-old crown prince became the de facto king in 2017.

## Partial reforms

The liberalisation bin Salman is overseeing through measures like introducing cinema to an entertainment-starved Saudi society is a controlled experiment, with no room for political opening-up. Like Deng Xiaoping in China of the 1980s, bin Salman is attempting a two-faced manoeuvre of partial reforms that act as a safety valve to let off steam in the pressure cooker, while keeping the lid of monarchical authoritarianism in place.

Bin Salman's progressive plan to reduce his country's dependence on oil through his "Vision 2030" program, while at the same time detaining thousands of political prisoners reveals the paradox of the Chinese-style reform model that he has adopted. Such a contradictory and selective reform agenda produces externalities that complicate a country's foreign policy. Bin Salman expects appreciation and applause from the international community for his bold, symbolic step to grant Saudi women the right to drive. But instead, Western liberals are pointing fingers at the underlying structural iniquities which continue to impair human rights in Saudi Arabia.





Trudeau's championing of human rights and democracy distinguishes Canada from the path the United States is pursuing under President Donald Trump. (Justin Tang/Canadian Press)

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Here's where Canada comes in. Under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Canada has made advocacy for universal rights central to its foreign policy agenda. He [confronted](#) Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte about the wave of extrajudicial killings he has carried out in the name of a "war on drugs" — so trenchantly, in fact, that Duterte decried it as a "personal and official insult."

Trudeau also delivered what was [called](#) a "very direct" talk with Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi over state violence and ethnic cleansing of Rohingya minorities. At international forums, Trudeau has been forthright about Canada's own dark history of its treatment of Indigenous peoples.

Trudeau's championing of human rights and democracy distinguishes Canada from the path the United States is pursuing under President Donald Trump. Indeed, the more Trump has assaulted liberal values of [tolerance](#), multilateral [cooperation](#) and human [dignity](#), the deeper Trudeau seems to have dug in to defend them.

Together with French President Emmanuel Macron and the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Trudeau forms a triumvirate within the West that is resisting the populist, nationalistic tide that has inverted domestic and foreign policy priorities of industrialised nations. Tweets and statements from the Trudeau government condemning Saudi Arabia have to be understood in this broader context.

## Yielding to China

There are, of course, limits to Trudeau's idealism. He has not sermonized to China over its deteriorating human rights record under President Xi Jinping, presumably because the stakes of China-Canada trade ([\\$93 billion](#) in 2017) and investment are sizeable. Nor has Trudeau stood up for environmental protection as much as activists and civil society movements would wish.

Yet in spite of the constraints and compromises of practical diplomacy, a seasoned ideological liberal like Trudeau cannot be deterred from slamming a rank abusive country like Saudi Arabia. Bin Salman's foreign policy score sheet has thus far been a series of reckless blunders based on illusions. His military entanglements in Yemen and Syria, and his [political arm-twisting](#) of Qatar and Lebanon to beat back the challenge from Iran, have backfired.

The assumption behind his diplomatic tussle against Canada seems to be that the liberal world order has already caved in, and authoritarian governments now have untrammelled freedom to crush dissent at home and browbeat opponents abroad. The Saudi reckoning appears to be that with Trump heading the anti-liberal camp and several right-wing populist European countries joining it, the time is ripe to vigorously counter and corner liberal holdouts like Canada.

Going by the [detached](#) American — and even British — attitude to the Saudi diplomatic offensive against Canada, Riyadh might reason that Trudeau is indeed marginalized in the emerging new international system. The fact that Canada's historic allies have not lined up solidly behind Trudeau as he locks horns with bin Salman does indicate Canada's relative isolation. It also speaks volumes about the liberal versus conservative/populist polarization sharply dividing Western democracies, which had hitherto formed a fairly coherent ideological bloc.





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But if Trudeau has been shortchanged by Trump, then over-reliance on Trump has cost bin Salman dearly too. Saudi Arabia tried to bully Qatar into submission in 2017 by banking on the expectation of undiluted American support. Doha rode out the storm and eventually secured [reaffirmation](#) as a top U.S. ally. The mercurial Trump reversed himself and heaped fulsome [praise](#) on Qatar in April 2018, much to the chagrin of the Saudis.

Trump has previously mocked Trudeau as "dishonest and weak," a broadside that may have emboldened the crown prince to go after Canada. But with Canada standing by its objections to denial of political rights in Saudi Arabia, bin Salman has scored nothing more than a self-goal that highlights the kingdom's vulnerabilities.

By escalating the row with Canada, bin Salman has attracted adverse international publicity to Saudi Arabia's jailing and ill-treatment of young human rights activists like [Samar and Raif Badawi](#). Ironically, the unwanted foreign attention from which bin Salman seeks to shield Saudi Arabia is likely to intensify as a result of his Canadian misadventure, not lessen.

It is far from a foregone conclusion that liberalism has completely lost its international ideological hold. No one can be sure of the final result of what is shaping up to be a zigzag tug-of-war between liberalism and populism. And until this epic contest is settled, bin Salman would be wiser to err on the side of caution rather than his trademark brashness.

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