

Decline of political Islam as a national ideology in Saudi Arabia has implications for the Islamic world

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King of Saudi Arabia Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud attends a Minister Council meeting in 2021. (Image: Twitter @Bandaralgaloud via Wikipedia)

Sipping coffee on his balcony in Jeddah, as a young lady with a short haircut jogged past his house in a tracksuit and another in tight jeans stepped into the grocery, my US-educated Saudi friend admitted to me that at times he can't believe this is Saudi Arabia. He is happy with the changes the Kingdom is experiencing – Saudi men (with partly state subsidised salaries) deigning to work as uber drivers and waiters, women running stores and sales, men and women socialising in cafes – things that would be unimaginable even six years ago.

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It reminded me of the French scholar Olivier Roy, who in the 1980s presciently **predicted** the end of Political Islam as a national ideology when it was at its peak. It is now falling in its most influential and storied bastion, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Over the coming decades this shift will inevitably aid the secularisation of the Sunni Muslim population – 87-90 per cent of all Muslims – across the world.

Roy reasoned that political Islam has no answer to the problems of modernity or for the aspirations of the populace. Seeing the **number of times** the Islamic Republic of Iran has had to use deadly force to put down urban **protests** over the past two decades lends

credence to the theories that Political Islam had become popular mainly due to the authoritarianism and failures of secular elites.

Unlike the broader Muslim world, the trajectory of Saudi Arabia did not start with secular elites. In the 300 years since Muhammed bin Saud, the founder of the Saudi state, met the preacher Muhammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the desert oasis of Diriyah, the Saudi state has been an alliance between the royal family and the Wahhabi clergy.

But the present de facto ruler, Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman, who is simultaneously carrying out a social revolution and a political coup, when asked about Wahhab **stated** that “there are no fixed schools of thought and there is no infallible person”.

The classic sociologist of modernisation, Max Weber, believed that it is a process that disenchant the world of its spirits and gods. Its onset though is more complex: Modernity that comes with rising incomes, particularly rising literacy not only leads to **nationalism** and demands for self-government but often initially leads to rising religiosity, textual fundamentalism and **reformation**. This was seen in **early modern Europe**, and so too in the Middle East, **South Asia** and the wider developing world.

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The failure to meet popular aspirations can lead to radical solutions from fascist and communist revolutions to politico-religious populism as in South Asia. Rapid economic development as seen in East Asia **seems to stave off** such identarian or radical outcomes.

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Saudi Arabia has been no exception, rising religiosity in the wider Middle East during the 1970s and especially the events of 1979, that is the capture of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Islamists and the Iranian revolution, led the rulers to a compensatory strengthening of this compact as the Saudi state increased both funding and powers for the religious establishment.

Under the pressure to combat violent extremism this arrangement had slowly started unravelling with the reforms of the previous ruler, King Abdullah, but has gathered unprecedented pace since 2016 under MBS, to the extent that it now seems fundamentally altered. **Educational curricula** have seen the removal of hardline, misogynistic and anti-Semitic content. Lashing and stoning have been removed from the law, and radical preachers have been **purged** from mosques and institutions. Women have the right to drive, discard the veil, travel unchaperoned, change residence, work at night etc.

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Meanwhile, changes in family law and **labour law** mean gender-based discrimination has been outlawed, sexual harassment has been criminalised and segregation requirement in the workplace has been abolished while making it easier for women to own businesses.

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Women's participation in the labour force has shot up to 33 per cent, from a modest 19 per cent, just between 2017 and 2022. Cinemas and concerts are now blooming in the desert and the sexes are mixing in public. But these are only the most evident changes, slowly but surely the religious establishment has been curtailed and stripped of its massive powers beginning with the religious police which can no longer punish or arrest.

This is happening in a theocracy where a fraction of these reforms were considered unthinkable for decades. How has this been possible? There are three major reasons: demographic and socioeconomic changes in Saudi Arabia and the wider Gulf; political centralisation under a next-generation leader at the top; and the extremes of violent Islamism over the past 25 years.

Seventy-four per cent of Saudi nationals are under 39 and these changes are very popular with them. With a literacy rate of 98 per cent, an 85 per cent rate of urbanisation and one of the most digitally connected populations in the world, the change could not have been indefinitely stalled. Changes in other smaller Gulf countries next door have a similar heritage and history.

There are economic compulsions too, with oil poised to lose its global value over the coming years and a young rising population that needs jobs, the Kingdom's economy is in urgent need of diversification. This explains MBS' Vision 2030 plan for the economy, which as he states cannot attract investments or jobs with a radicalised society.

Moreover, why would tourists travel to Saudi Arabia if Saudis themselves travel to Dubai and Qatar to watch a movie? The danger though lies in the case that the overly ambitious economic program fails, this will hurt the social and cultural reforms as well. But should they succeed even halfway, they will have been transformative.

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Even with a ready population, it required a leader like MBS to make the changes as rapidly as they happened. A young man in a hurry, he needs the younger generation on his side in order to centralize and consolidate power away from the consensual and sclerotic royal family, as well as the religious establishment. Like the previous king, he has **emphasised** Saudi nationalism at the expense of its religious character.

Not everyone was, or is, in favour of these reforms and it required the legitimacy and heavy hand of the Royal family to push it through. Those independent conservative clerics, some of whom have **millions of followers online**, that have spoken out against

the reforms have been silenced or jailed, irrespective of how popular, senior or nonviolent they may be.

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The changes have happened not by openly opposing the **Wahhabi doctrine** but by sidestepping it and actually using it to justify the reforms. The power of the official clergy has not just been clipped, they have been coerced and cajoled into legitimising the reforms that MBS is rolling out. Dependent on royal patronage and committed to the Islamic doctrine of supporting the King, the official clergy cannot do otherwise. One of the main obstacles to royal power and reforms has thus been neutralised

The international dimension of these changes extends to a strict domestic clampdown on Islamic charities as well as a moderation of the external face of Saudi Islam that is represented by the World Muslim league. Its head, Sheikh Al Issa, has delegitimised all violence in Islam's name, even within Israel. He delivered the main Haj sermon this year and now regularly meets and visits Christian and Jewish leaders at home and abroad, including a visit to Auschwitz. MBS has himself met delegations of visiting evangelicals a couple of times.

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The excesses of violent extremism unleashed by al Qaeda and ISIS over the past two decades have paradoxically helped to legitimise these changes. In addition, the decades of strife in and around Saudi Arabia have culled the most violent among the hardliners and left others with nightmares of that time.

In these, lie lessons for other Muslim countries like Pakistan: the public, especially the youth's weariness with extremism and hunger for jobs can be used to curb radical ideologies. Change though, at times, comes from rulers, civilians and military, who are perceived as Islamic, but not always. As Bangladesh shows, Islamic rulers when they deliver jobs and growth can curb Islamism. Irrespective though, without stability and religious moderation there can be little investment or employment.

As the birthplace of Islam and through the millions who visit it for the Haj pilgrimage as well as its millions of guest workers, Saudi Arabia sets the standards for what is truly Islamic in the Sunni world. Just as Muslims adopted conservative religio-cultural mores from the 80s onwards, should Saudi reforms last, it will be difficult for their practices to remain unchanged in the coming decades. In the words of Weber, Saudi Arabia, and by extension MBS, have ironically become the instruments of disenchanting the Muslim world.

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