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The Daily Star

What does ‘reform’ mean in Saudi Arabia?

By NEIL PARTRICK

August 09, 2010

Under the ageing King Abdullah, those in the Al-Saud family seeking to advance economic, legal, and political (or, perhaps more accurately, administrative) reform seem to be in a race against the clock.

The assumption of many inside the kingdom is that the next two to three years could be decisive. Elite figures sympathetic to reform are concerned that what has been achieved – modest by international standards, significant by Saudi Arabia’s – will stall under a King Sultan or a King Nayef (the more likely of the two, given health concerns about Crown Prince Sultan). Changes made since Abdullah acceded in 2005 lack an institutional basis and have not captured the imagination of Saudis, leading to the impression that they constitute personal whims that can as easily be taken back or put indefinitely on the back burner.

Reform in Saudi Arabia is not the result of a clearly articulated program intended to reach a defined outcome; rather, what is often referred to as reform is more about changing the environment.

A more open environment has certainly emerged in the last few years. Various media outlets controlled by Saudi Arabia's competitive ruling elite publish different commentaries on local and regional politics. But this is not a true debate; it is more a public posting of distinct opinions. Among the issues receiving the most attention are the appropriate role of women and the related role of the mutaween (religious police), public sector corruption, education reform, and the need for Saudi nationals to be better equipped for a more dynamic private sector.

Thus far reform has largely meant putting putative reformers behind key desks in ministries and public bodies. So, in marked contrast to Saudi tradition and to the wider regional trend, the Education Ministry has become something of a reformist fiefdom, at least as far as the top jobs are concerned, making it an important focus of King Abdullah's patronage in the intra-Saud power play.

Actual reform of educational practice, however, has not progressed beyond some curricula and course book changes, as well as the establishment of a controversial co-educational island of excellence, the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) near Jeddah. KAUST, notably, is not under the authority of the Higher Education Ministry, even though it is envisaged that it will eventually be subjected to formal state control.

One area that is likely to get attention, whoever succeeds King Abdullah, is technical training. Saudi Arabia cannot bridge the gap between population and economic growth without obliging Saudi nationals to work more, and for less, in the private sector.

Judicial reforms have in practice seen the creation of a new Supreme Court as the highest court of appeal, but this is essentially a name change for what was previously a function of the Supreme Council of the Judiciary (SCJ). The new role envisaged for the SCJ, the training of often ill-informed judges, has yet to begin. Although many of the salaried ulama, or clergy, remain the same highly conservative old breed, the SCJ is under new management.

Codification of Sharia, or Islamic law – potentially important for a more predictable legal environment for business and those seeking redress for human rights infractions – has been agreed upon. When it will be published in an authorized majalla (gazette) or written compendium of legal judgments designed to constitute legal precedent, is less clear. A previous official majalla dating back to the era of Abdel-Aziz Ibn Saud, who founded the state in 1932, soon fell into disuse.