

Changes Come—Slowly—to Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has long been—and in some regards remains—one of the most closed societies in the world. Insulated by geographic isolation, the Saudi royal family has utilized its vast oil money to mute continuing demands for meaningful change in areas such as women's rights and political liberties.

It is true that Saudi society has already experienced a great deal of change. "Most of the population was semi-nomadic 25 years ago. It is not hard to meet urbane professionals whose fathers and mothers were illiterate." The monarchy has actively promoted "...mass industrial and urban development, free education that includes graduate studies abroad, and education for women."

But in other regards, the pace of change remains glacial. This is a nation in which modern fast food restaurants are periodically patrolled "... by Islam vice squads, known as Muttawa, who zealously enforce closing for prayer hours, restrictions on mingling between the sexes, and dress codes to cover women's bodies." Women are still not permitted to drive or, in most cases, to work with men; the press is heavily censored; opposition political parties are banned; and slavery was only abolished in 1962.

Most of the demand for change comes from "...the small, urban, very affluent and modernizing circle of interrelated business, professional, and royal families who form a class part in Saudi society. Their contradictorily Westernized lives are distant from the broad mass of still very traditional Saudis whose existence is guided by strong fealty to the royal family and a profoundly conservative faith that fills the mosques at prayer time."

"Much of the country's elite has been educated abroad, travels regularly and spends vacations at their villas in England, Spain and the United States. There they... wear shorts, go to the movies, and perhaps enjoy a glass of wine with dinner. Saudi girls and boys may go on a date. Saudi women drive cars, study, and sometimes find a job." But all of these freedoms must be abandoned when they return home.

Perhaps the single area in which the pressure for change is greatest concerns women's rights. The prohibition on gender integration in the workplace forces Saudi employers to import millions of foreign workers, mostly from India, Pakistan, and the Philippines, while Saudi women sit at home, bored and unproductive.

More generally, the monarchy is gradually realizing that, in the modern era, it is essential that Saudi society become "...a more open system in which criticism, information and new ideas can flow without spurring social chaos or violence." There is growing pressure for increased freedom of the press. The Saudi people also want the information of a national council or an elected assembly to advise the king. A professional army and an international security pact to protect the oilfields are also much discussed.

Most of these changes become more likely as Saudi society slowly opens. There is virtually no demand for the abolition of the monarchy, which provides the psychic glue that holds the disparate elements of the nation together. As in most of the world, nationalism remains a critical factor in easing the wrenching process of cultural modernization.

Source

LeMoyne, James. "Fuel for Saudi Debate: Opening Society without Causing Strife," *New York Times*, October 31, 1990.