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Affirming the Saudi Will to Power: Domestic Challenges to King ‘Abdullah

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Executive Summary

There are at least three sets of questions to tackle in studying domestic challenges in Saudi Arabia: political reforms within the judiciary; ongoing “National Dialogue” seminars that mobilize thousands; and internal family dynamics where a few royals are pushing for the establishment of political parties. How well one is able to understand the many permutations within these three communities is important.

While political dissent is still frowned upon in Saudi Arabia, the very rule of King ‘Abdullah bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz is premised on change, which cannot be reversed without inflicting permanent damage. Many have high hopes that he will not drop the baton — especially since he has demonstrated that he can deliver — though the monarch’s “will to power” requires that he harness and unite the energies of both liberal and Islamist reformists.

Over a single week in late 2007, the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King 'Abdullah bin 'Abd al-'Aziz, authorized the establishment of a Supreme Court, issued by-laws for his 2006 succession edict that named its permanent members, and ordered his foreign minister to take necessary steps to counter the rise of the kingdom's regional hegemonic foe, Iran. 'Abdullah affirmed his will to power, husbanded new reforms that aimed to refurbish vital institutions, and strengthened the Al Sa'ud ruling family.¹ How well 'Abdullah managed his manifold concerns and successfully moved political markers both on the domestic as well as international fronts illustrated his preoccupations. They also revealed the many challenges facing Riyadh.

SUCCESSION AND THE ALLEGIANCE COMMISSION

'Abdullah reaffirmed his will to power on October 8, 2007 when an 18-article decree provided by-laws to the 2006 Succession Edict, which regulated political succession.² Although the 25-article "Allegiance Law of Succession" replaced the informal family gathering that selected and approved successors, it lacked critical operational features, which was probably intentional. In fact, while secret deliberations were not excluded in this latest imprimatur, the Commission was now equipped with lucid regulations to rationalize the procedure.

In a surprise move, 'Abdullah addressed his brothers, sons, and nephews in a remarkable talk that centered on service to the nation and to Islam. He reiterated his belief that the Al Sa'ud ruling family was of the "nation and the people are from us, and we all share the honor of belonging to this country." The discourse was spontaneous, reminiscent of impromptu talks that the late King Faysal bin 'Abd al-'Aziz was famous for, as 'Abdullah called on the Ulama "of wisdom, thought and creed" to rally around the throne since the Al Sa'ud respected them. He further urged his brothers, sons and nephews "to become God fearing people and to enhance the pillars of justice, to close ranks, settle differences through discussion and dialogue, and never allow anyone to interfere in the family's affairs." Most in attendance were stunned at this level of attention in preliminary remarks and anticipated a major declaration. 'Abdullah did not disappoint.³

Speaking to all surviving sons of the country's founder, 'Abd al-'Aziz bin 'Abd al-Rahman, who were led in the Majlis by Prince Mish'al, Heir Apparent Sultan, as well as dozens of grandsons, the monarch issued a breathtaking order that identified the membership of his "Allegiance Commission." The Commission encompassed every son of the founder or, in case of death, a single grandson chosen by the sub-branch. Remarkably, the royal decree placed 35 specific names around the decision-making table where the next ruler was to be chosen [see Table 1]. Although the monarch and his heir apparent were naturally absent from this list, their respective eldest sons were part of the group, which was divided more or less evenly between sons (16) and grand-

1. This essay is the third in a series that examines Saudi leaders' decision-making process. See Joseph A. Kéchichian, "Testing the Saudi Arabia 'Will to Power': Challenges Confronting Prince Abdullah," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Winter 2003), pp. 100-115; and Joseph A. Kéchichian, "Saudi Arabia's Will to Power," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (February 2000), pp. 47-60.

2. Joseph A. Kéchichian, *Power and Succession in Arab Monarchies* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008), pp. 245-59; The 2006 Commission edict (*Hay'at al- Bay'ah*) is reproduced on pp. 463-69.

3. P.K. Abdul Ghafour, "Mishaal Named Allegiance Commission Chairman," *Arab News*, December 11, 2007, p. 1.



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sons (19). All vowed before the ruler, pledging to God “Almighty to remain loyal to Religion, King and Country, not to divulge any of the state’s secrets, to preserve its interests and systems, to work for the unity of the ruling family as well as the national unity, and to perform duties sincerely, honestly and justly.”

The Saudi monarch named Mish‘al bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, a former deputy Defense Minister and Governor of Mecca, chairman of the commission to select future kings and heirs apparent.⁴ Gone was the closed room conclave between a handful of senior men, and though it took more than a full year between the initial announcement on October 7, 2007 that such a body was in fact formed and its members appointed, it was nevertheless a major development as it regulated the super-sensitive succession question upon the death of every king. Interestingly, ‘Abdullah first issued the institution’s bylaws, which explained how the process would actually work, before choosing its members, perhaps to allow for the idea to sink in. Yet, the reliance on a growing number of grandsons confirmed that an institutionalization process was underway because members of this second generation lacked their predecessors’ necessary experience.

Thereafter, upon the death of a monarch, the Commission was expected to quickly gather to choose a ruler and confirm the latter’s heir apparent, who must be chosen within ten days of the ruler’s accession to the throne. Failure to do so would mean accepting the council’s alternative choice. Though the statute further confirmed that the King must approve council decisions, it was not clear what procedures would be followed if the king contested committee selections. This major stumbling block notwithstanding, King ‘Abdullah was slowly placing his own mark on the Saudi monarchy through the refinement of the Allegiance Law. Although the powers of the monarch were not questioned in this law, they illustrated the ruler’s meticulous approach and his intrinsic preferences.

DOMESTIC CONCERNS

The second critical step taken by ‘Abdullah a few years after his accession was the establishment of an independent judiciary. In fact, this move was neither a spontaneous act nor a reaction to the slew of clashes that had occurred between the Kingdom’s clerics and members of the intelligentsia throughout the past two decades. Instead, what prompted the king finally to launch his long-term plan were several egregious cases that mobilized public opinion.

One of the key events that prompted action was the September 2007 petition to King ‘Abdullah urging him to release nine advocates who had been held for at least seven months without a trial, ostensibly because they had called for the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. At least 135 reformists, including 49 women, had signed the petition, according to Muhammad bin Hudayjan al-Harbi, one of the signatories. Ironically, this particular plea was mailed to the ruler rather than hand-delivered in an audience, as custom would require, because many of the signatories believed that they were not welcome at Court. Still, the petition was widely circulated in order to highlight the crackdown on reformists.

It is difficult to determine whether these petitioners were emboldened by Talal bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz’s call to establish a political party, which would presumably be open to reformists. Suffice it to say that activists supported Talal’s idea. In any event, the nine detainees, all prominent lawyers who were first arrested in February 2007, faced serious charges.⁵ According to Interior Ministry officials, they were allegedly involved in funding terrorist groups or were considering the formation of an Islamic political party. Since the nine did not appear in a court of law to answer charges, observers believed that they had been arrested for contemplating the creation of a political party which is prohibited

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4. Ghafour, “Mishaal Named Allegiance Commission Chairman.”

5. The nine lawyers were: ‘Isam Basrawi, Sa’ud al-Hashemi, ‘Abdul Rahman Khan, ‘ ‘Abd al- ‘Aziz al-Khirayji, Musa al-Qarni, Fahd al-Qarshi, Sayfiddin Faysal al-Sharif, ‘Abdul Rahman al-Shemayri, and Sulayman al-Rushdi.

Table 1: Original “Allegiance Commission” Membership (2007)

Note: Grandsons are in italics

1	Mish‘al bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud
2	‘Abdul Rahman bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud
3	Mit‘ab bin ‘Abd al- ‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud
4	Talal bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud
5	Badr bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud
6	Turki bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud
7	Nayif bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud
8	Fawwaz bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud
9	Salman bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud
10	Mamduh bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud
11	‘Abdul-Ilah bin Abdulaziz al-Sa‘ud
12	Sattam bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud
13	Ahmad bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud
14	Mashhur bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud
15	Hadhlul bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud
16	Miqrin bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud
17	<i>Muhammad bin Sa‘ud bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud</i>
18	<i>Khalid bin Faysal bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud</i>
19	<i>Muhammad bin Sa‘ad bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud</i>
20	<i>Turki bin Faysal bin Turki (the first) bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud</i>
21	<i>Muhammad bin Nasir bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud</i>
22	<i>Faysal bin Bandar bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud</i>
23	<i>Sa‘ud bin ‘Abdul-Muhsin bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud</i>
24	<i>Muhammad bin Fahd bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud</i>
25	<i>Khalid bin Sultan bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud</i>
26	<i>Talal bin Mansur bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud</i>
27	<i>Khalid bin ‘Abdullah bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud</i>
28	<i>Muhammad bin Mish‘ari bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud</i>
29	<i>Faysal bin Khalid bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud</i>
30	<i>Badr bin Muhammad bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud</i>
31	<i>Faysal bin Thamir bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud</i>
32	<i>Mish‘al bin Majid bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud</i>
33	<i>‘Abdullah bin Musa‘id bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud</i>
34	<i>Faysal bin ‘Abdul-Majid bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud</i>
35	<i>‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin Nawwaf bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud</i>

in Saudi Arabia under current regulations. The petition on their behalf confirmed this assertion since it read that all nine were “examining ideas pertaining to civil society mechanisms, such as an ‘Islamic national charter’ or an ‘Islamic constitution party’ and a ‘committee for freedoms and basic rights’ that would be proposed to a number of reformists.” The guilt by association charge — funding terrorists — was rejected *in toto*, as the document contended that the real purpose of these detentions was to “tarnish (the image of) proponents of a civil society.”⁶ The petition urged King ‘Abdullah to free all nine activists, or at least ensure that they get a public trial as stipulated by Saudi law. ‘Abdullah surprised many when he ordered that ‘Isam Basrawi, one of the nine advocates of a constitutional monarchy, be freed in late September.⁷

This was not the only step taken by the ruler. In what must have been the toughest decision since he ascended to the throne, ‘Abdullah warned Saudi clerics not to exploit their privileges for political ends. Riyadh insisted that some imams were manipulating their privileged platforms to rant against issues to which they were not privy. Speaking with the ruler’s blessing, one of the Kingdom’s leading clerics, Shaykh Salih Al Luhaydan, publicly warned against the transformation of prayer into political speech. “There are imams who digress from prayer to the point where it becomes a news bulletin. [Our prayers are] not an occasion to mention friends and enemies,” he opined.⁸ Another influential cleric, Shaykh Salih Al Sadlan — a leading faculty member at the Imam Muhammad bin-Sa‘ud Islamic University in Riyadh — chimed in with an even stronger criticism, maintaining that some imams were transforming their pulpits into the “United Nations Organization.” In fact, many imams were probably taking advantage of their positions to pray for Muslim “victories” in Chechnya, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and other countries going through crises, which did not please the monarch.

Remarkably, this warning was the tip of the iceberg, as observers felt the palace’s growing anger. In a major blow to the Islamist ideology espoused by extremists like Usama bin Ladin and his followers, Riyadh managed to persuade a leading opposition figure, Shaykh Salman bin Fahd Al-Awdah, to criticize those who injured Islam. “We as scholars of Islam reject what Osama does,” Al-Owdah wrote in an open letter posted on his website www.islamtoday.com, and questioned the validity of the reliance on violence. “What have we gained from the destruction of a whole country such as Iraq and Afghanistan” and “who benefits from turning countries like Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and Morocco into insecure places?”⁹ asked the popular cleric.

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This was a significant victory for the Al Sa‘ud because al-Awdah was never part of the official religious establishment. As such, his views were perceived by a vast majority, especially among younger Saudis, as being objective. Indeed, the scholar did not mince his words and repeatedly asked: “Brother Osama, how many wars and how much bloodshed has occurred in the name of al-Qa`ida? How many innocents, old men, children are killed in the name of Al-Qa`ida? Are you happy to meet God carrying this heavy burden on your shoulders?” Those who heard Al-Awdah were awed by his straightforward tone, blaming the al-Qa`ida leader for what no one else dared utter, namely a lust for power. And amazingly, Al-Awdah made a direct link with the tragic events of 9/11 when he declared: “The attacks of September 11 resulted in the deaths of thousands of human beings. Unknown callers to Islam (missionaries) are by far better. They help tens of thousands become Muslims without shedding blood.”¹⁰

Whether the Al-Awdah essay was planned with the Kingdom’s religious and civilian authorities is difficult to determine, although repeated inquiries yielded no evidence that he was coached. Still, in a carefully vetted system where

6. “Saudi activists urge king to free jailed reformists,” Agence France-Presse, September 14, 2007.

7. “Saudis free one of nine reformists,” Agence France-Presse, September 22, 2007.

8. Turki Al-Saheil, “*Mufti ‘Am al-Sa`udiyyah Yahziru al-Shabab min al-Zihab ilal-Khatij biqasad al-Jihad*” [“Saudi Arabia: Calls Against Imams Politicizing Prayer”], *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, October 2, 2007, p. 1.

9. Khaled Al-Awadh, “Oudah Denounces Bin Laden’s Ideology,” *Arab News*, September 17, 2007.

10. Al-Awadh, “Oudah Denounces Bin Laden’s Ideology.”

little occurs haphazardly, Al-Awdah was probably privy to what was about to happen to the clerical establishment. In an astute move, Al-Awdah could well have taken preventive measures, or he may have finally realized that Islam’s peaceful attributes deserved far more attention than extremists had accorded it. In any event, Al-Awdah rejected violence and expressed his sorrow over the negative image that certain extremist actions imposed on Islam.

Starting in 2004, Saudi authorities led by Muhammad bin Nayif, the Assistant Minister of the Interior for Security Affairs, arrested 3,200 individuals charged with embracing the *takfir* ideology (i.e., accusing dissenting Muslims of being infidels). This was a major sweep; but what was unique about it was the lengthy counseling that followed. Most detainees, including clerics, were subjected to heavy psychoanalysis. A committee composed of about 100 Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowments, Call, and Guidance personnel — religious scholars, preachers, specialists in religious doctrine and law, psychologists, and social workers — proceeded to reform the detainees. According to Muhammad Al-Nujaimi, a member of the Counseling Committee and professor of comparative jurisprudence at the King Fahd Security College, thousands of meetings were held to counsel extremists as to what the *Shariah* actually stipulated. “The suspects were largely confused about the meaning of *jihad*, which led to their believing in committing blind violence,” Al-Nujaimi asserted. “They also viewed that the present Muslim rulers, scholars and public were infidels, and therefore demanded the establishment of a single Islamic state,” which was neither acceptable nor feasible.

There is no doubt that this was an exercise in de-programming. For Al-Nujaimi, individuals were released — and 1,500 were “healthy” enough to return home by late 2007 — “after several graded sessions with the committee,” convinced them “of their misguided vision, [as] they renounced their erroneous ideologies, including the concept of driving out all infidels from the Arabian Peninsula.” King ‘Abdullah’s will to power required that those subjected to these counseling sessions understood and accepted “the concept of obedience to a ruler, loyalty, conditions for *bay’ah* (i.e., declaration of allegiance to a ruler) and the mistaken concept of murder and violence without guilt.”¹¹ Slowly but surely, Islamist clerics were rehabilitated, as hundreds turned away from extremism.

Interestingly, popular opposition to many excesses helped Riyadh accelerate its rehabilitative initiatives, relying on public opinion to mobilize support. In fact, popular anger against disproportionate reactions became frequent, no longer simply anecdotal occurrences. In September 2007, two Saudi women called members of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice “terrorists” allegedly because the women were stopped in the Eastern Province city of Al-Khobar for not conforming to the Kingdom’s public dress code. What was remarkable about this incident was the courage of the women, one of whom sprayed the *mutawa’in* with pepper spray while the other filmed the incident. According to a commission spokesperson, two officers “were attacked, cursed and sworn at by two women, who were blatantly dolled up” [meaning the women were wearing makeup]. Although the women apologized for “attacking” *mutawa’in* officers, signed a statement recognizing their infringements, and were released, the mere fact that Commission members saw the women’s faces meant that the latter were not veiled. Other incidents in the far more liberal city of Jiddah preoccupied *mutawa’in* who worked in earnest to prevent the mixing of the sexes. Few contemplated that such reactions would ever be recorded in Saudi Arabia.¹² Members of the ruling family, including the monarch, followed these incidents vigilantly. While most greatly restrained themselves, *majlis* discussions often covered details, especially what was seldom revealed in the press. Nevertheless, the straw that broke the proverbial camel’s back and which led ‘Abdullah to action, was the

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11. “Over 1,500 Extremists Freed After Repenting,” *Arab News*, November 26, 2007.

12. “Woman Attacks Vice Cops With Pepper Spray,” *Arab News*, September, 25, 2007, <http://arabnews.com/?page=1§ion=0&article=101656&d=25&m=9&y=2007>.

horrible case of the “Qatif Girl.”¹³

According to a well-placed source, King ‘Abdullah was furious when he heard of the case, and turned his wrath in private against clerics who appeared to take the law into their own hands. In the case of the “Qatif Girl,” a young couple was raped by a gang; the young woman was then sentenced to 200 lashes and six months in prison because she was found guilty of being in “isolation” with a man in a vehicle. ‘Abdullah deemed that the victim was subjected to “a brutal crime” and issued a full pardon. Importantly, Justice Minister ‘Abdullah Al al-Shaykh read the exoneration on television and, in the ruler’s own words: “A mistake in pardoning is less than a mistake in punishment, according to Islamic jurists. As no final ruling was issued by the court, besides a (*Ta’azir*) ruling, [which is based on an interpretation of *Shariah* by a judge or panel of judges] we are allowed to pardon her.” The King would simply not allow the court to carry out its excessive sentence of 200 lashes and a prison term because the woman was deemed to be a victim and because the man with whom she was in “isolation” was in fact her fiancé. The pardon further ordered the suspension of the trial against both defendants as well as a full pursuit of the seven young men accused of rape.

Although the monarch uttered supportive words towards independent justices, his pardon nevertheless sent a warning to those who failed to protect victims, which was an incredibly novel idea. A day after the pardon, members of the Saudi Women’s Association issued a statement thanking ‘Abdullah “for recognizing the brutal nature of the crime and reversing the decision to punish the rape victim.” The statement further requested that Riyadh issue legislation to protect “women from abuse and family oppression.”¹⁴ Although the Saudi government probably responded to pleas issued by local and international human rights organizations, the “Qatif Girl” case illustrated that the monarch was monitoring the matter rather closely. Moreover, ‘Abdullah, like his father, was keen to set specific parameters on judicial matters. According to reliable sources, ‘Abdullah winced when told that “one of the judges of the High Court openly expressed his desire to see the rape victims and the rapists executed.” In this case, he was horrified that respected members of the community could think and speak in such a degrading fashion. Therefore, he rejected a clerical verdict for being unjust and, like his father, took it upon himself to bestow true and fair justice.

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To placate powerful clerics and to further channel challenges emanating from conservative clergymen, ‘Abdullah allocated SR7b (US\$2.8b) to develop the judiciary and Grievances Board laws in order to prepare a new cadre of qualified judges. Modern facilities, court buildings, and other requirements were envisaged to alter the medieval image of the judiciary. In fact, the new regulations foresaw the transfer of judiciary privileges from the Supreme Judiciary Council (SJC) to the High Court, leaving the function of the SJC confined to the employment affairs of judges. This was vintage ‘Abdullah, who recognized clerical rights but worked in earnest to modernize them. Towards that end, his latest call stipulated the establishment of seven grades of court, including the High Court that was responsible for monitoring the application of verdicts under *Shariah* as well as all royal decrees. The High Court, which would be the equivalent of a Western-style Supreme Court, thus would rely on appeals, criminal, personal affairs, commercial, and labor benches. ‘Abdullah was empowering an institution to stand as “an independent demonstrative judiciary reporting directly to the King,” whose magistrates enjoyed the guarantees that were stipulated in the emergent judiciary system.¹⁵ No one was immune to these methods, as an unnamed imam in Ha’il discovered in early 2008. Spewing anti-Western sermons from the pulpit, the imam was sentenced to seven months in jail and 150 lashes. Riyadh balked at various pleas to release him after the overzealous cleric issued death threats to a government official.¹⁶

13. Qatif is a region in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia.

14. Ebtihal Mubarak, “Qatif Girl’ Subjected to Brutal Crime: King,” *Arab News*, December 19, 2007.

15. Mariam Al Hakeem, “Saudis approve independent judiciary,” *Gulf News*, October 2, 2007, http://archive.gulfnews.com/region/Saudi_Arabia/1-157753.html.

16. “Saudi court imprisons anti-Western cleric,” Agence France-Presse, January 1, 2008.

Affirming the Saudi Will to Power: Challenges to King ‘Abdullah

While the October 2, 2007 announcements to create an independent Supreme Court as well as a Grievances Board mandated that the two bodies to supervise the implementation of *Shariah* and laws enacted by the King, they buttressed the authority of trained judges to reach relatively free decisions. In fact, the new Supreme Court was empowered to do much more than evaluate rulings or uphold verdicts issued by appeals courts. Once fully realized, plainly defined directives required that adjudicators apply fair and uniform measures across the board, precisely to eliminate current fluctuations due to varying and sometimes contradictory interpretations. This was a major step forward, and while the SJC was authorized to oversee administrative aspects of the judiciary, including the appointment of magistrates, another feature required that judges undergo periodic training. This is a truly unique novelty in a country that has experienced a severe shortage of magistrates — where less than 50 adjudicated over 80,000 cases per year. Thus, the challenge was to provide adequate training to judges and attorneys not only in the law itself, but also in the sorely wanting accountability process. Nevertheless, the mere fact that significant resources were earmarked for such projects illustrated the ruler’s intentions, clearly motivated by the quest for proficiency.

NATIONAL DIALOGUES

The decision to encourage a national dialogue on social issues is perhaps the most interesting recent development in affirming ‘Abdullah’s “will to power.”¹⁷ A series of major events illustrated how rich these debates were, showcasing both Saudi society’s cultural strengths as well as the shortcomings that need attention at this stage in the country’s development. They certainly allowed many of the participants to display intellectual and managerial skills that were documented for the benefit of citizens.¹⁸

To date, the National Dialogues illustrated how some were putting a great deal of effort into creating positive changes, while others resisted them. Saudis discovered how difficult it was to achieve change, especially when the environment was not habituated to welcoming it. Nevertheless, these dialogues demonstrated that preparing for reform was time consuming, and that dialogue could not become a competition in which winners and losers clashed. Rather, the public was exposed to ideas, projects, and various recommendations to assess their worth. Opening channels of communication and creating opportunities for participation were novel methodologies which shocked television viewers. Many quickly learned that dialogue does not mean one-way communication.

In rare exercises, Saudis heard how ambiguities prevent reforms. They paid attention to speakers who clarified objectives, defended their ideas, and focused on the subject matter rather than merely repeating state-driven prose. These initial national dialogue experiences taught citizens that those who resist change back off when they understand what the debate is all about. They learned from experience, accustomed themselves to listening to others, and understood the substance of key debates. Some even had the courage to admit miscalculations and apologized instead of resisting.

The first six dialogues allowed thousands of Saudis to participate — while millions watched on television — and helped Riyadh to raise the bar. King ‘Abdullah was anxious to further empower these forums, as the latter identified specific socioeconomic shortcomings that could only be tackled with public support. The dialogues stood as pillars of ‘Abdullah’s will to power — buttressing his efforts to demonstrate that the best decisions are based on national consensus.

CONCLUSION

17. Kéchichian, *Power and Succession*, pp. 240-43.

18. Yousuf Al-Qablan, “National Dialogue and Change,” *Al-Riyadh*, December 9, 2007, p. 1.

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As if these measures were not stunning enough, Prince Talal bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, likely with the King’s full approval, recently proposed to form a political party in Saudi Arabia. This was a calculated declaration by a trusted brother who no longer challenged family concord. In fact, Talal believed that political reforms were in the best interests of the ruling establishment, even if others preferred reform at a slower pace. ‘Abdullah recognized that genuine sociopolitical reforms were long overdue and seemed to be working in earnest to address them. Should a political party be established, chances were excellent that it would be led by an Al Sa‘ud steeped in established traditions and would further guide whatever reforms were implemented. The ultimate challenge for Riyadh, however, was whether the Al Sa‘ud were able to keep up with the reformist ruler, since reorganizations by themselves were not enough. Rather, as societies equipped themselves with the wherewithal to self-govern, and trained legal minds to look after their interests — both that of the general public as well as of each individual — it behooved the ruling establishment to correctly interpret their “will to power.” ‘Abdullah’s ultimate challenge was to affirm his own resolve as well as acculturate putative successors to appreciate the limits of power. This was critical as he forged ahead with inclusive political institutions that added value to citizens at large — not easy propositions under the best of circumstances, but certainly within the realm of the possible in Riyadh because of the monarch’s foresight, dedication, and impeccable credentials.

Still, the gravest immediate challenges here are the many uncertainties, variables, wild cards, and obstacles associated with the monarch’s raft of initiatives, all of which originate in the ruling Al Sa‘ud family. When the police storm homes, arrest prominent reformists (including lawyers, doctors, academics, and judges), and do not bother to charge them, the monarch’s own record is compromised.¹⁹

After his accession in 2005, ‘Abdullah promised permanent change, and introduced key steps to restore his citizens’ dignity. That ‘Abdullah slowed down was somewhat natural although his “will to power” is strong enough to withstand internal criticisms from extremist Saudis who wish to disrupt his momentum. The monarch may be convinced that those who are calling for reforms are speaking out as genuine citizens. Were ‘Abdullah to support the more conservative elements within the ruling family, who would prefer to nip such plans in the bud, the monarch’s carefully designed scheme would not survive long.

While political dissent is still frowned upon in the kingdom, ‘Abdullah’s very rule is premised on change, which cannot be reversed without inflicting permanent damage. Many have high hopes that ‘Abdullah will not drop the baton, especially since he has demonstrated that he can deliver. His greatest challenge, therefore, comes from the ruling family itself, which he must tame. Ultimately, ‘Abdullah’s “will to power” requires that he harness and unite the energies of both liberal and Islamist reformists.

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19. Roger Hardy, “Whatever happened to Saudi reform? BBC News, June 6, 2008, http://bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/7230083.