

The Role of Private Business in the Democratization Process of Saudi Arabia

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The term democratization of Saudi Arabia has different meaning to different people. In fact, most Saudis consider democracy a western concept¹. Historically democracy has been identified as the form of government that allows citizens equal participation in the decisions that affect their lives, empowering every member of a community with the opportunity to contribute towards self-governance. As a positive definition, democracy as a form of government has been highly simplified, where individual views have been grouped into usually two opposing sides or parties, replacing popular direct sovereignty with a tiered system of representative democracy, highly diminishing the power of the individual citizen and their right to political self-determination.

However, democracy hopefully extends beyond the scope of the political arena into more intrinsic aspects of citizen's life, wherein the presence of democracy essentially affects the socio-economic performance of a community. Equality under the law, as well as in making the law, is at the essence of democracy. Naturally, granting all citizens equal participation means women are entitled to equal rights in governing themselves, and playing a role the decision making process. Further, countering poverty and extending basic rights, not only associational rights, in terms of food, water, healthcare and education to all citizens, is part of the democratization process.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an Islamic monarchy, however as Caroline Montagu points out in her article 'Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector in Saudi Arabia'², it is important in understanding the state and ruling monarchy to recognize that they are not homogenous nor

¹ The electronic survey that we have conducted last year showed that the majority of respondents considered democracy as a western concept. However, we have repeated the survey last February after the success of the Tunisian and The Egyptian people revolutions and found a larger percentage of Saudi to be more sympathetic as they identified democracy as a form of participatory government.

² Caroline Montagu, "Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector in Saudi Arabia", The Middle East Journal, Winter 2010

hegemonic. Therefore, although civil societies in Saudi Arabia are not integrated as part of the formal political structure, there is an informal yet highly active relationship between them, which aims towards creating a healthier social environment.

Saudis that have been supposedly held back culturally and pushed back historically from political instigation have nonetheless taken certain initiatives to have a say about issues in terms of their neighborhoods and immediate concerns, with the intention of creating a healthier social environment. We intend to show that the very existence of these informal initiatives in society have a direct bearing on the political level, in that although formal political pluralism does not exist, they do provide a vehicle of communication between citizen and state. Indeed, the formality, or lack thereof, of these civil societies, is only secondary to the substantive role they play both politically and socially. “Focusing studies of civil society exclusively on questions of legitimacy, consensus and hegemony may draw attention away from important cases in which the state’s right to rule is not widely questioned but where the growth of civil society’s institutions, nonetheless, dramatically affects the overall distribution of power.”³

In developing societies, normally the middle class provide the catalyst for social reform, even when the issues affect primarily ordinary people. Saudi Arabia is no different, as we see private businessmen and merchant families identifying key issues and spearheading civil societies to implement change. Civil societies established by individuals have created a safe forum where ideas are brought to the table, yet unlike the National Dialogue⁴,

³ Joel S. Migdal, “Civil Society in Israel”, in Ellis Goldberg, Resat Kasaba, and Joel S. Migdal, eds., *Rules and Rights in the Middle East Democracy, Law and Society* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993), pp. 122-23, as cited by Caroline Montagu, “Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector in Saudi Arabia”, *The Middle East Journal*, Winter 2010

⁴ Saudi Arabia had many National Dialogue meetings. “It is a series initiated by then Crown Prince Abdullah in June of 2003 that brings together different members of society to discuss different issues. They are very useful because Saudis are usually not brought together in anything but business and religion. They are now being brought together in the National Dialogue. The obvious problem with it is that nothing concrete seems to happen after the sessions. Also every National Dialogue session has different people attending it so there is no momentum reaching out across the Saudi population. Dr. Rachel Bronson, author of “Thicker than Oil, Americas Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia,” about her first hand observations from the Jeddah Economic Forum. Saudi-US Relations Information Service. Web: <http://www.Saudi-US-Relations.org>

solutions are taken away and implemented. Private citizens have demonstrated a powerful momentum in following up on ideas, and moving them from paper to execution, in turn empowering the lower part of the hierarchy.

It is in this way that civil societies are able to contribute to the process of democratization, by actually creating a mini-simulation of how citizens are able to govern themselves at the micro level, and according to a recent study, it appears that leading businessmen are the driving force for Corporate Social Responsibility⁵ in the country. Private businesses have the formal structure, the funding and generally the vision to be able to extend the reach of their projects further than the direct surroundings and communities. CSR projects have been able to identify issues that extend beyond the individual and local surroundings to problems that cut across social classes and regions. Saudi Arabia is essentially a country with different tribal, ethnic and cultural origins that have yet to reconcile. CSR and civil societies in general override these differences and focus on the shared predicaments.

Regardless of the diversity, the Kingdom remains an Islamic country, governed by the so-called Shari 'a law. Having been ingrained in the social structure of the country, it can be said that Islam pervades Saudi society. Thus, it is not surprising that the initiative for civil societies and private businesses is not fueled by governmental, political or even capital gains. In Saudi Arabia, all sustainability projects have socio-religious roots. Zakat (purification of capital) is actually the third of the five pillars governing Islam, wherein citizens are required to give 2.5% of liquid assets annually to charity, and sadaqa (alms-giving) is a societal norm. Therefore, the subject of 'giving back' to the community is not the issue, but rather the mechanism. Traditionally, government organizations and departments have been responsible in conducting the charitable and welfare activities of the state, yet private businesses have become increasingly aware of the social responsibility they carry, as well as the opportunity they have to have a much more profound impact.

⁵ "The Evolution of CSR in Saudi Arabia", A Study by Tamkeen Sustainability Advisors, January 2010, p.7

Another unique form of democratic social interaction is found in various cities in Saudi Arabia. In 1925, the notables of Jeddah mostly local merchants decided to surrender the city to Abdulaziz Ibn Saud. Consequently, Ibn Saud was declared the new King of Hejaz and Jeddah merchants gained great status with the new king, which guaranteed them a larger degree of freedom.

The merchants' families who were prominent in business even before the creation of Saudi Arabia and the unification of the peninsula, managed to maintain their old traditions of gathering within each neighborhood of Jeddah to discuss local problems and to organize volunteers to respond to social needs.

The same tradition spread to Riyadh and to other cities. Today, several meetings are held in various neighborhoods everyday of the week in the house of a well to do businessperson. The talks, from personal experience, cover a variety of topics, ranging from religion to politics and media coverage of current events and welcome all those interested to partake and express their opinion, as long as it is done in a respectful and constructive manner. The meeting usually goes on from after the last prayer of Isha' until midnight and end with a lavish dinner for all attendants.

Although these discussions do not necessarily lead to any tangible change or policy revision per say, on a micro-level they do represent the essence of the ideology of democracy where every willing participating citizen is welcome to share their input.

Examples of present weekly gatherings in Jeddah:

Saturday:

- 1- Sabtiat Al Manna' hosted by the notable writer Abdullah Almannan'
- 2- Sabtiat Al Radwan hosted by Businessman Abdulbasit Radwan

Sunday

- 1- Ahadiat Ishki Hosted by Dr. Anwar Ishki
- 2- Ahadiat Al Nasseef hosted by Dr. Abdullah Omar Nassef

Monday

- 1- Ithnayniat Khoja hosted by businessman Abdelmaksoud Khoja
- 2- Ithnayniat Al Bassan hosted by businessman Walid Al Bassam

Tuesday

- 1- Tholothiyat Attayeb, hosted by businessman Mohammad Said Attayeb (Abul Shayma')
- 2- Atholothiya Al Makkiya, hosted by Dr. Sami Ankawi

Thursday

- 1- Khamisiat businessman and writer Mohammad Omar Alamoudi

Friday

- 1- Al Jumawiya, hosted by businessman Dr. Abdulrahman Fakeeh

These weekly lectures and meetings represent a breeding ground of ideas, and reintroduce the concept of intellectual debate which is a part of the Saudi culture that has been foregone by the countries educational system. Nomadic tribes as well as Arabian scholars have been known through the ages for their late night gatherings, conversing democratically about Art, Music, Politics and issues directly affecting citizens. Yet the Saudi governmental education system has been criticized for being heavily reliant on rote learning⁶, thus eliminating the entrepreneurial and creative elements necessary for constructive debate.

Another important form of civil participation is through the local Chambers of Commerce and Industry. The Council of Saudi Chambers was established in March 1980 in Riyadh to oversee and coordinate the regional chambers, and support the development of the private sector and enhance its role in national development.⁷

The Jeddah Chamber of commerce is one of the most prevalent and active in terms of its breadth and depth in servicing the local community through the direction of the same local businessmen we discussed previously. They advanced forward from their local weekly informal into a more organized setup. The actual constitution of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI) is democratic, with electoral campaigns and voting required in attaining positions of office on the management board or

⁶ Ursula Lindsey, 'Saudi Arabia's Education Reforms Emphasize Training for Jobs', The Chronicle of Higher Education, October 2010, <http://chronicle.com/article/Saudi-Arabias-Education/124771/>

⁷ About the Council, Council of Saudi Chambers, http://www.saudichambers.org.sa/2_1276_ENU_HTML.htm

part of the general secretariat. The JCCI is a case study in how civil life when led by businessmen is able to vary despairingly from the regular community lifestyle, and even more so from the state instilled system. For example, one of the vice-presidents of the JCCI is a woman, Dr. Lama AlSulaiman, with at least two other female members of the JCCI serving on the board. The president of the JCCI oversees the main sectors of the JCCI, namely the Business and Committees Sector, the Business Sectors Support Division, the IT and Information sector, and finally the Support and Services sector. However, more importantly are the specialized centers that the JCCI has established. There are seven specialized centers at the JCCI, including the Jeddah Business Development Center to support small independent businesses and the Jeddah Social Responsibility Center. In addition, the JCCI oversees the Jeddah Marketing Board which is the organizing task force behind the Jeddah Economic Forum, a growing event which has seen top-tier speakers including heads of states and corporations alike over the years. This center is also responsible for portraying the image of Jeddah as a tourism hotspot in the Kingdom. Other specialized centers are the Jeddah Center for Events and Forums, the Jeddah Law and Justice Center, Jeddah Job Development Center, Jeddah Training Center and the Khadeejah Bint Khuwailed Center. The Khadija Bint Khuwailed Women's Center has taken a prominent role in the Jeddah civil society scene. The idea, which was first presented in 2000, materialized in 2004 as a forum for women to discuss their local issues, spearheaded by the voluntary work of a handful of Saudi middle-class women who began presentation and confidence building classes for women⁸. The name of the center is attributed to the first wife of Prophet Muhammad, who prior to their marriage was and remained an important businesswoman. Islam has always granted women equal rights in terms of business, property and ownership, and have had these rights protected for over 1400 years. The Khadija Bint Khuwailed Center has appealed to the sensibility of the Saudi culture in establishing itself and its laws. Primarily, the purpose of the center is to facilitate women's' dealings

⁸ Caroline Montagu, "Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector in Saudi Arabia", *The Middle East Journal*, Winter 2010

with the chamber⁹; however they have also been active in improving the laws and regulations in place that have restricted female business owners in the past based on the local culture. Previously, women were only allowed to operate businesses in certain industries, such as beauty and fashion, however thanks to the perseverance and lobbying of the center, women are now able to trade in real estate, construction, contracting and public services, all industries that were forbidden to women previously. Also, the center was pivotal in removing the requirement that a woman needed permission from her legal guardian in order to participate in a business venture. According to Ms. Basma Al-Omair, executive director of the center, they are currently working on removing the requirement that Saudi businesswomen must hire a male manager for their business if it is located in a mixed environment¹⁰. These issues and achievements, though small, cannot be diminished and are an important step towards opening up the business environment to free trade, but more importantly is a model of how private businesses have been able to directly and democratically achieve a fundamental change in laws through a civil association.

The civil outreach programs of the center also extend guidance to the society, and is highly active in teaching Saudi women through discussion forums and seminars how to assume the responsibility of their role in society. The topics that are broached in these seminars do show the level of development and depth that the center has progressed too. The first seminar held in March 2009 focused exclusively on job interview techniques and resume building, with women from the workforce sharing their own experiences about starting small businesses and being employed. In contrast, by November 2010, the topic of the Khadija Bint Khuwailed Center's forum was 'The Realistic Participation of Women in National Development'. At this event, prominent businesswomen shared their experiences alongside clerics and religious men that discussed the importance and benefit to society as a whole of the participation of females in the workplace. Although

⁹ About the Center, Khadija Bint Khuwailed Center, JCCI
<http://www.jcci.org.sa/JCCI/EN/Specialized+Centers/Khadija+Bint+Khuwailid+Center/About+The+Center/?cnName={C3B92370-5714-4325-BCD1-555BA1CCB0C4}>

¹⁰ Lulwa Shalhoub, 'Rocky Road Ahead for Saudi Women Studying Abroad', Arab News, June 2010
http://arabnews.com/supplement_archives/top_20_supplement/article66314.ece

the forum did not result in any direct changes of regulations, the center's continued efforts to shed light on shocking statistics is essential in developing the psyche for acceptance of the Islamic concept that women have both the ability and the right to be successful in private business.

Another important forum and platform for civil association is the National Dialogue, which began in 2003. The importance of the National Dialogue lies in the fact that it is able to cut across all three major regions, bringing to point issues that are important to all citizens. However Caroline Montagu does point out that instead of 'bringing together' citizens, the National Dialogue instead has highlighted the huge rift in ideology and demands of the Saudi people. By focusing on pluralism, individual and minority rights, the National Dialogue makes differences stand out, such as during a session entitled 'Women's Rights Under Islam', which saw an emotional and verbal outburst between conservative men and liberal women.¹¹ That however does not take away from the important role many men have played in emphasizing women's rights in the Kingdom, and a great deal of development in women's rights can be attributed to educated private businessmen and professionals, who have paved the way, albeit less vocally than their female counterparts, for the execution of change. Montagu discusses how women could not have gotten so far in municipal election campaigns without the support of Shari 'a (Islamic law) judges.¹² These private individuals have identified the problems facing the society and have exercised their civil association individually in this respect. Though their effect may have been profound, the truth is that the reach of individual professionals remains limited and inconsistent.

However, of all the methods of civil participation available, private business initiative could prove to be the most influential. Private businesses have the ability to reach across the nation, as well as the funding and organization in place to offer continued support and assistance. The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in Saudi Arabia is both old and new. CSR has unabashedly taken the corporate scene by storm, yet keeping

¹¹ Caroline Montagu, "Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector in Saudi Arabia", *The Middle East Journal*, Winter 2010

¹² Ibid

in mind the social culture and religious background of the country, the challenge for CSR in Saudi Arabia has been changing the perspective of Corporate Responsibility from being one of charity to one of sustainability. Tamkeen Sustainability Advisors is the first Saudi consultancy firm to offer Corporate Social Responsibility consultancy and programs for private businesses in the Kingdom. In January 2010 they released their study entitled ‘The Evolution of CSR in Saudi Arabia’, which offers an interesting insight into how the concept of CSR has taken shape within private businesses in Saudi Arabia. Founder and Managing Director, Ms. Asya AlShaikh, pointed out in her opening to the study that ‘CSR has evolved from being an alien concept to a buzzword in the corporate arena’, pointing out that Ms. AlShaikh’s definition of CSR refers to sustainable responsibility and competitive sustainability in the Kingdom.¹³ The study highlights that although the social and religious context in the Kingdom is the basis for performing good deeds, key issues such as a better workplace, health and safety standards and good governance are being recognized as areas of interest to both the private and governmental sectors alike. Yet the study does also recognize that although CSR has gained momentum and popularity among private businesses, this momentum appears one-dimensional, with programs being able to cover a large range of topics, as well as being able to cut across regions, thus achieving depth; however the issue remains that CSR in the Kingdom has yet to achieve real depth. Despite the resources available to them, private businesses have failed to achieve their full potential and instill a meaningful impact in the society as a whole.

The main factor that limits CSR goals from achieving their full capacity appears to be the perception of CSR as a cost rather than an investment. Saudi companies assume that the greatest benefit from CSR for a company is reputation and image development. Whereas smaller businesses, and private businessmen and women from large and prominent Saudi merchant families have been able to set up smaller sustainability projects in their communities, as a whole, CSR has adversely been unable to grasp the concept of sustainable giving as opposed to charitable projects,

¹³ ‘The Evolution of CSR in Saudi Arabia’, A Study by Tamkeen Sustainability Advisors, January 2010, p. 2

which is the traditional corporate responsibility concept. Saudi companies need to become more aware of the benefit in financial and social terms that they are able to bring about through their responsible behavior towards their employees, shareholders and customers, as well as the benefit they could potentially be presenting toward social improvement. The best way for private businesses to achieve depth and impact through their civil service initiatives would be to align their initiatives with national development priorities. Although a few Saudi companies do consider national development priorities while setting the CSR direction, it is not the primary consideration.¹⁴ Instead, private Saudi businesses opt to link their CSR philanthropy with issues that align with their company image or product. Yet more often than not, it is difficult to find a direct alignment between both, resulting in very superficial campaigns that provide only temporary relief. Breadth has been achieved, but the move from charity to a form of self-governing will come from active implementation with a vision to achieve goals; ideally the goals that have been identified as part of the national development scheme. By aligning their strategies with national priorities, companies would be better equipped to further the democratization process in the country since they would be directly contributing to the betterment of their society through their own choice to participate in associational life.

The biggest players in CSR are the industrial, banking and retail sectors, which have devoted their attention mainly to employee well-being, community development and the environment. Private charities on the other hand have been more instrumental in combating more politically substantial issues, such as women empowerment, women representation in courts, changes in family law, political and human rights, unemployment, the medical impact of endogamy, family violence, disabilities, sexual abuse and poverty.¹⁵ Companies have opted out of tackling core problems, and the reality is that Saudi companies believe that the main reason CSR is not creating a meaningful impact on national development is due to a lack of support from the government and media.¹⁶ Companies have cited this issue

¹⁴ 'The Evolution of CSR in Saudi Arabia', A Study by Tamkeen Sustainability Advisors, January 2010, p. 5

¹⁵ Caroline Montagu, "Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector in Saudi Arabia", *The Middle East Journal*, Winter 2010

¹⁶ 'The Evolution of CSR in Saudi Arabia', A Study by Tamkeen Sustainability Advisors, January 2010, p. 6

with regards to a lack of direction from the government. Only a minority of Saudi companies have attempted to use their CSR programs to help fulfill national development goals.

The Saudi government has yet to recognize the incredible potential that private businesses harbor when it comes to positive contribution to society. Once the government is able to appreciate this, they will be able to identify the challenges facing private businesses in this regard, and will be able to provide the support structure as well as the facilities to help CSR programs set their goals parallel to national development priorities. Further, the government should offer subsidies, reimbursements and other incentives in order to motivate private businesses to take up national development needs as part of their philanthropic programs.

Similarly, Saudi companies have expressed a disappointment with the media when it comes to portraying CSR programs as charitable projects embarked on by private businesses, as opposed to linking CSR goals and achievements to national priority needs. Yet on the other hand, companies have credited the media with being the most important external driver for public awareness and response to private business initiatives.¹⁷

In addition to a lack of governmental direction and guidance, governmental regulations have also hindered the actual implementation of CSR. The regulatory framework has proved to be overly bureaucratic due to a lack of uniformity in regards to regulation in Saudi law. This in turn, has brought up problems regarding corruption, the legal and court system and an overall lack of support from various governmental agencies. Labor laws have left CSR departments facing problems of available qualified talent. Over the past decade, Saudi labor law has adopted a policy of ‘Saudization’, trying to move away from expatriate workers in an attempt to bring down the local unemployment rate. As a result, implementation of this policy has become stringent and highly regulated and enforced. Yet the output of the educational system, which as previously discussed is subpar, has left a vacuum between what is required in terms of globally competitive talent that would be able to implement creative and forward thinking solutions, and

¹⁷ ‘The Evolution of CSR in Saudi Arabia’, A Study by Tamkeen Sustainability Advisors, January 2010, p. 8

between the young graduates that have been trained through a system that does not encourage creativity.

The issue of education has plagued many debates on national development and self-governing. The government claimed that certain civil rights have not been supported by citizens, and have in some cases, such as the matter of legalizing females driving, been shunned and rejected. The opposing argument is that citizens have not received adequate or appropriate education in order to be able to demand these rights. A recent article¹⁸ by a female Saudi legal consultant, Tala Al-Hejailan, argues that the lack of women's rights and hence human rights in the Kingdom stems from ignorance and misinterpretation of Islamic teachings. The article reiterates the point that Islam granted women rights with regards to ownership, career, family and education 1400 years ago, whereas these rights were only achieved by women in the West at the beginning of the 20th Century. Thus, it is shocking to her that it is these same women that are resistant to change base their stands on Islamic teachings. The article highlights an important point; women in Saudi Arabia are not necessarily oppressed by their male counterparts per se, but are rather resistant to the 'ambush of Westernized ideas regarding women'¹⁹. The Saudi government has been operational and attentive to the needs of women by providing scholarships for those who choose to pursue academic degrees abroad, as they have to men. In addition, the Saudization law does call for an increase in the employment of women. Therefore Al-Hejailan makes the essential point: 'As in a democracy, how can one change a system, in which the majority of people reject positive and necessary change?'²⁰ There has been an overall call for reform in the educational system, from 'radically Islamic' to 'Islamically Informative', yet this has been slow to grasp.

Yet education is not the only factor causing resistance to change. Saudi Arabia is a country where people with the same education have very different opinions heavily influenced by culture and tradition. Even among

¹⁸ Tala Al-Hejailan, 'Education Key To Women's Rights', Arab News, April 2011
<http://arabnews.com/opinion/columns/article340848.ece>

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

the highly educated elite, many believe that radical cultural change is not appropriate for Saudi Arabia and the Saudi people. Saudis have extended from Bedouin life to the cities over less than 50 years. Yet even through the process of urbanization, they have maintained the importance of preserving their traditions and cultures. In a post 9/11 era, there is a widely spread perception among Saudis that Western morality is being aggressively imposed on them, in an attempt to strip Saudi Arabia of its identity. Many Saudis have become highly defensive in the face of what has been perceived as the heavy hand of America that has extended to other countries in the Arabian Gulf, tainting the authentic and pure lifestyle of their ancestors. This has made most Saudis resistant to the Western model of democratization. While a western democratic model is not likely to be embraced in Saudi Arabia, yet that is not to say that a Saudi democratic model is not possible.

This rift in public opinion has left the ruling monarchy with a dilemma. A step towards Westernization would be perceived as ripping Saudi of its Islamic identity, and as such the monarchy has displayed that it would rather maintain the status quo than risk being perceived by its citizens as a Western puppet. In order to avoid disturbance of the delicate balance, the state cannot display overt affection towards Westernization and Westernized democratization, and must practice restraint. Hence, the Saudi state has developed a policy of stability rather than volatility with regards to implementing change, and it is this policy which has truly played to Saudi Arabia's benefit. Although the state has moved very slowly in a Western direction, the country has had time to slowly adapt to the changes that have been made, thus gaining stability. Although much progress is still required for Saudi Arabia, we must keep in mind that it is a relatively young country that has brought together a variety of ideologies from its oil rich, work oriented Eastern province, through its harsh desert capital, to its historical religious centers and trading cities in the West. Too much change too fast would not be received well. However, civil societies especially East and West of the country, have been able to implement change at a much faster pace, by providing an alternative structure of instigating reform, yet still extending traditional morals and values throughout the population.

It must be pointed out that not all civil societies are welcomed, and highly independent branches are shut down,²¹ yet even the state has recognized that it can benefit from a ‘bottom-up’ approach to reform in a model where citizens, led by the example of private businesses, have taken the initiative to govern themselves.

As a result, we have seen a political enmeshing of the monarchy and civil societies, with many royals providing patronage at all levels of associational life. Although this may not be what is intrinsically expected, given the generally opposing directions of each force, we have seen primarily that the monarchy, like the citizens of Saudi Arabia, is not homogeneous²². Indeed, although CSR have identified that the government and regulatory framework as their main challenge in being effective, having a royal on board can be influential in pushing projects through in the right direction.

By western standards, Saudi Arabia has severe problems, not the least of which is women’s rights. Religious conservatives continue to wield a club to keep Saudis in check. The judicial system is mired in tribal customs and the abuses of male guardianship have put a stranglehold on women’s ability to find employment or travel. The unemployment rate is at least 10 percent and perhaps as high as 20 percent. Thousands of young Saudi men and women graduating from local universities have no job prospects while others returning with applied science degrees from foreign universities find it easier to find employment. Only 10 percent of the Saudi population owns their own homes.

While the Arab spring this year witnessed one revolution leads to another in countries neighboring Saudi Arabia, western analysts who compare Saudi Arabia to its neighbors fail to consider that not a single Arab country threatened with anti-government protests is similar to the Kingdom. Saudis, I observed, are neither worried about the near future nor they are seriously thinking about changing their system of governance.

²¹ Caroline Montagu, “Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector in Saudi Arabia”, *The Middle East Journal*, Winter 2010

²² Ibid

The Saudi government recognizes that some of these issues are critical and it is continuously trying to find solutions. On March 18 after Friday prayer, the king announced a new wave of benefits for the citizens. He thanked the citizens for their loyalty and called the youth the safety valve for the nation.

For the first time, the government agreed to establish unemployment allowances up to one year to help Saudis find jobs. University students studying abroad at their own expense will now receive scholarships. SR 1 billion (\$266.6 million) has been added to the social welfare rolls. SR 14 billion (\$3.7 billion) will be available for home loans. The government also announced Tuesday that it is setting aside SR 10 million (\$2.6 million) to fund literary clubs and licensed NGOs.

What was actually missing from the king's address to his people was a road map to a constitutional monarchy that will enable the Saudi people to have constitutional rights at a point in the future and pull the rug from under the opposition.

Either way, Saudi Arabia does not require a revolution, but rather a progressive evolution in the functioning of the state, leading towards more social and political freedoms. Private businessmen have provided an alternative and a non threatening method of citizens' participation by opening up the avenues of civil societies. As civil societies, and especially CSR programs develop and become more sophisticated, the government will need to further cooperate with this channel and use it efficiently.

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