

Viewpoints
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Will Saudi Arabia's Social Revolution Provoke a Wahhabi Backlash

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Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman has been fast-tracking a wave of social reforms that the ultraconservative Wahhabis and their supporters may not be able to withstand. While many, especially women, hail the reforms, the kingdom's top religious leaders are fiercely denouncing them on religious grounds, provoking fears of a severe Wahhabi backlash.

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Saudi Arabia's new de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, is pushing his country at breakneck speed into major social reforms, rousing concern about a backlash from the kingdom's ultra-conservative Wahhabi religious establishment, the bedrock of the ruling House of Saud for over two and a half centuries. Senior clerics who were speaking out loudly against these reforms have been summarily silenced or thrown into jail, but they have millions of followers on social media who have yet to be heard from.

The 32-year-old crown prince is in the process of engineering a fundamental shift in the social and political base of the al-Saud family from this powerful religious constituency to a new generation of educated youth and women befitting a country where two-thirds of the population is under 30 years of age. Yet his new base of popular support is still inchoate and he is using a popular mandate for reform to promote a new form of autocratic governance. Indeed, Saudi Arabia is witnessing an unprecedented centralization of power in the hands of just one prince who brooks no opposition or even the slightest hint of criticism.

Whether Crown Prince Mohammed can keep that support under such restrictive conditions is emerging as a key question facing the future of what could well become the longest reign of any king in the 275-year history of the House of Saud. However, his immediate challenge is the state-supported Wahhabi establishment which is fast losing its power and influence over Saudi society, particularly over women. Many independent Saudi clerics as well as the Islamic State are also attacking his reforms.

For the time being, the seemingly unending cascade of these reforms has evoked delight and applause from millions of young Saudis, particularly women, long stifled by the puritanical straight jacket imposed on them by Wahhabi clerics clinging to a Seventh Century interpretation of Islam. During just a ten-day visit in April, this writer witnessed the re-opening of movie theaters after more than 30 years; a pop musical performance by Egypt's Cairo Opera; the inauguration of construction on an entertainment city outside Riyadh three times the size of Disney Land in Florida; and a "royal rumble" put on by World Wrestling Entertainment attended by 60,000 Saudis. Still to come on June 24 is the official startup of driving by women in the last country in the world where it had been strictly forbidden.

This "normalization" of society had been stymied for decades by the royal family's cuddling of its Wahhabi clerics in reaction to the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the takeover of the Mecca Grand Mosque by Islamic extremists that all occurred in one year, 1979. In addition, the late King Fahd (1982-2005) sought to overcome a reputation for dissipation in his youth by kowtowing to the demands of the Wahhabi clerics.

Less than eighteen months ago, the kingdom's top religious leader was fiercely denouncing every social reform that is now being implemented as *haram*, or forbidden, on religious grounds. In January 2017, the blind grand mufti, Abdulaziz al-Sheikh, condemned the crown prince's new General Authority for Entertainment for introducing music concerts and movies. He described them as "a depravity" imported from the West whose intent was "to change our culture." Al-Sheikh warred that "no good" could possibly come from singing while movie theaters would surely lead to "a call for mixing sexes" in public. "This corrupts morals and destroys values," he lectured Saudis.

The public following of clerics on social media is massive and that of even more conservative independent religious scholars far larger than the mufti's. The latter include Sheikh Mohammed al-Arifi, who counts more than 15 million followers on his Twitter account; Sheikh Awad al-Qarni, more than two million and Sheikh Salman Oudah, over 14 million. Both official and independent clerics have had until recently the enthusiastic backing of the Commission for the Protection of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, the *Hai'a*, whose policemen, or *mutawa*, barred all forms of entertainment and enforced the strict separation of men and women in public, other than families and married couples.

Another hallowed taboo has long been women driving. Saudi clerics focused their religious zeal on attacking this reform by all means, including mobilizing their female supporters to oppose it. One cleric, Sheikh Saleh al-Lohaidan, claimed medical studies showed driving "automatically affects the ovaries," and that women who drive regularly faced "clinical problems of varying degrees." Another cleric, Sheikh Saad al-Hajari, argued women shouldn't drive because of their "lack of intelligence" compared to men. Even when a royal decree was finally issued last September permitting women to drive, the government disclosed that only a "majority" of the 21-member Council of Senior Scholars had approved it and that many had expressed concern about its ill effects on Saudi society.

Backed by his father, King, Salman, Crown Prince Mohammed has pushed to put these ultra-conservative clerics under state control using a variety of tactics. Even before becoming crown prince in June 2017, Mohammed convinced his father to strip the *mutawa* of their power to arrest people and order an end to their harassment of Saudis in public places. The *Hai'a* has recently redirected its energies to cracking down on fake healers using Koranic verses to exorcise Saudis afflicted by witchcraft.

The crown prince has also asserted government control over the issuing of religious edicts to stop criticism of his social reforms and had the grand mufti repeatedly remind Saudis of their religious obligation to show allegiance to the king. In addition, he stopped the mufti and other clerics from appearing on live call-in television shows where they were venting their spleen at his reforms. Last September, the crown prince went even further to include twenty clerics and religious scholars in the roundup of scores of opposition activists. Among them were Sheikhs Oudah and al-Qarni, the popular independent clerics mentioned earlier, both of whom had been involved in the *Sahwa* religious "uprising" that shook the country in the mid-1990s. Oudah was arrested right after voicing support for reconciliation with neighboring Qatar, now under a Saudi-instigated land, sea and air boycott, to punish it for giving sanctuary and a bullhorn to various exiled Arab opposition figures to air their grievances.

At the least sign of criticism from any cleric now, the crown prince is rushing to silence it. Last month, the twitter account of Sheikh Saud al-Shuraim, an imam at the Grand Mosque in Mecca, was shut down after he suggested the social reforms were not in keeping with Islamic precepts. Because the Saudi government has clamped down so tightly on freedom of speech and even more so that of assembly, it is difficult to assess what these clerics and their millions of followers intend to do to impede the multitude of social changes taking place – at least in the big cities. The religious diktat against the mixing of unrelated men and women in public is already being ignored in some cafes and restaurants of Riyadh and Jeddah that still maintain "Families Only" and "Males Only" entrances but make little efforts to enforce mixing inside.

The government also made little effort to prevent “mixing “at the first two movie theaters to open in Riyadh that featured the newly-released “Black Panther” and “Avengers: Infinity War” . Some Saudis are predicting the mixing of the sexes will become the “new normal” within a year.

The showdown with dissenting clerics may come as concerts, entertainment centers and movie theaters open up in smaller towns where their influence is greater. The government has announced plans for 250 theaters and numerous centers across the country. One prominent Saudi journalist suggested there is a process already underway that may spell trouble ahead: the ultra-conservatives increasingly feel alienated from the “New Saudi Arabia,” then become angry and finally turn to outright rebellion.

Saudis are well aware that the most serious challenges to the ruling House of Saud have historically come from Wahhabi zealots and activists such as those who seized control of the Grand Mosque in 1979 and led the Sahwa movement in the mid-1990s. Given this history, another Wahhabi rebellion against the icon-smashing crown prince can hardly be ruled out.



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