

Viewpoints
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Young Saudis and The Kingdom's Political Future

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Many young Saudis admire the youthful protesters of Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and Bahrain. But they don't seek to imitate their tactic of massive street protests. One reason why is that they still hope—despite the lack of available evidence—that the Saudi royal family will voluntarily begin to share power with the Saudi people. Presumably then, the government can rest easy? Not necessarily.

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Murphy's recent book, *A Kingdom's Future: Saudi Arabia Through the Eyes of its Twentysomethings*, is available for download at the Wilson Center's Middle East Program website: <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/kingdom%E2%80%99s-future-saudi-arabia-through-the-eyes-its-twentysomethings>.



For a few days in March 2012, female students at King Khalid University in Abha, a city in southwest Saudi Arabia, captured the attention of their countrymen and of news organizations around the world.

Fed up with poor conditions at their all-female campus and with restrictions on their Internet access, they boycotted classes and staged a rowdy demonstration during which furniture was thrown about and windows were broken. The students also pelted female security guards with empty water bottles and soda cans. The next day, hundreds more female students joined the campus protest, complaining about a lack of chairs in their facilities, overbearing security and university officials, and uncollected piles of trash. The university called in local police and more than 50 girls were treated for minor injuries, according to Saudi press reports.

Inspired by the women's actions, male students at the university held their own protests in solidarity. Before their anger and energy dissipated, they were demanding an end to "corruption" in the administration, more competent professors, and the ouster of the university's rector, whose picture was posted on Facebook with the bright red international "No" sign over it. His allegedly "closed and bureaucratic" personality, the students wrote, had made him unfit for his job.

As news of the events spread, observers marveled that in a country where females live under a myriad of restrictions and strict gender segregation, it was young women who had ignited the protests. And with youth-led movements in several other Arab countries openly defying authoritarian governments – and already by then having toppled four Arab dictators – commentators also wondered if Abha was the opening act in the kingdom's own "Arab Awakening."

As it turned out, the King Khalid University protests incited several small outbursts at other Saudi universities, but they proved fleeting. In the end, Saudi Arabia was not shaken by a nationwide, revolutionary youth movement.

Demographically, the kingdom is certainly primed for such a movement, with 64 percent of its 19.4 million citizens below the age of 30. (By comparison, 41 percent of the U.S. population is under 30.) But that is where comparisons with other Arab youths end. And there are many reasons why Saudi Arabia, an absolute monarchy, has not yet seen a massive outpouring of political dissidence among its youth. First, young Saudis are better off financially than many other Arab youths and do not face the bone-breaking poverty endured by many in countries like Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Tunisia, and Syria. All Saudis are certainly not rich, but they have strong social welfare nets provided by both the government and large extended families.

Secondly, the government targeted youth in a \$130 billion package of benefits announced in February 2011, soon after the downfall of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Included in the package was the kingdom's first program of unemployment benefits. A few months later, the government launched a highly publicized effort to tackle youth unemployment by reducing the number of expatriate workers and thus opening up vacancies for Saudi job-seekers.

In addition, the government has quietly signaled to disgruntled young Saudis that it is not totally tone deaf to their complaints. For example, university officials were told to make sure that any protest that materialized did not snowball. So officials at several campuses moved quickly to meet with students at the first sign of discontent. In Abha, they met with protest leaders to discuss their demands. In July, the rector was replaced.

The government also has – so far at least – taken a relatively benign stance toward the sometimes withering broadsides it receives on Twitter, many of them tweeted by young Saudis with apparent impunity. The result is a very accessible and visible steam valve for discontent.

Saudi youth also have been disinclined to follow their Arab peers into the street by Saudi society's strong religious and cultural dislike for overt political opposition. The country does not have a tradition of public resistance or civil disobedience; citizens are schooled to relay criticism of their leaders through private channels. And soon after the Arab Awakening began, the kingdom's Grand Mufti, Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Abdullah Al-Asheikh, issued a fatwa declaring protests *haram*, or religiously prohibited.

It is relevant too that many young Saudis are extremely fond of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, whom they regard as a benevolent ruler. As such, many young people considered it inappropriate to challenge his government. As one 22-year-old university student in Riyadh said, "The king is a very, very good man. That's why no one has the bravery to ask for going out" into the streets.

During a three-year tour in Saudi Arabia and later in conversations with scores of twentysomething Saudis, I found that many of them admire the youthful protesters of Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen. But they don't seek to imitate their tactic of massive street protests. Moreover, they don't see the need to do so because they still hope – despite the lack of available evidence – that the royal family will eventually begin to share power voluntarily with the Saudi people.

Saudi youths for the most part are evolutionary, not revolutionary. They do not want to tear down the House of Saud. In fact, a large segment is disinterested in politics and sees no need for reforms. They display a conspicuous lack of concern about acquiring political rights and don't give much thought to being a "subject" of the monarchy versus a "citizen" of the state. They are content with the status quo, as long as the state continues to dispense financial benefits and promote an Islamic national identity.

So, *for the time being*, there does not appear to be a critical mass of youth demanding the type of reforms that threaten Al Saud rule, and the Saudi government does not face a generation of angry, rebellious twentysomethings.

Presumably then, the government can rest easy?

Not necessarily.

Nations often enter watershed eras without fanfare, the segue unnoticed until years later. Saudi Arabia has already entered such an era, a time that will increasingly be defined by its youth. That the kingdom's population is heavily weighted with young people is already well known. But a deeper dive into its population data brings this germane detail to the surface: Saudis now 13 to 17 years old make up the largest percentage – 12 percent – of the country's population. As such, they are the biggest "youth bulge" ever seen in the kingdom. No age cohort after them – that is, among Saudis younger than 13 – are as numerous because of declining fertility rates.ⁱ

The first members of this largest-ever "youth bulge" will start turning 18 in 2014. As they do, they will commence their march into the job market in search of well-paying jobs and into the country's fast-expanding universities. These youths won't remember life without the Internet and are likely to be even more connected to and influenced by a globalized culture than their older siblings. As they move through their 20s over the next few years, all the material challenges faced by the government – an unemployment crisis, demands for more recreational opportunities and more affordable housing – are going to intensify.

And so will political challenges. Despite the apolitical stance of many young Saudis, it is equally true that a smaller, but still significant, slice of politically-attuned Saudi youths deeply resent their lack of political and civil rights and would like a say in how they are governed. These politically conscious youths include activists with an Islamist perspective as well as progressive or liberal Muslims who see the West as a model adaptable to their country and culture. They would like to see gradual steps sooner rather than later toward a more accountable and transparent government. Many say they favor a constitutional monarchy.

These youths have been emboldened by the Arab Awakening, whose principal impact in the kingdom has been to raise political awareness. Some youths I interviewed cited greater willingness by people to demand what they view as their “rights.” As a 23-year-old medical school student in Jeddah said, “There’s more courage from the youth to just demand things, whether it’s a right or a privilege or a dream.” Referring to the Abha protests, he added: “We never heard of such things before. It makes sense. People just want things, and now they have more courage to demand them.”

This segment of politically aware Saudi youth will likely expand and increasingly demand a more participatory and more transparent government. They may not call this “democracy,” but they will want reforms that give them more control—ideally one in which they share power with the monarchy. And if the growing numbers of young people heading into the workplace in future years—especially the 145,000 Saudis now studying overseas—encounter economic hardship brought on by unemployment, this desire for political reform will grow.

Three other thorny matters will influence the future political stance of Saudi young people, depending on how the government handles them. One is the spreading anger about the thousands of prisoners held for years without trials. Most were rounded up as the government sought to quash al-Qaeda’s violent attacks between 2003 and 2006, and the government alleges they are all sympathizers or members of al-Qaeda. It also maintains that the approximately 5,700 still held are all in some stage of a judicial process and that many have already been tried. But those trials were not open to the public and as a result many questions are unanswered. The secrecy surrounding these prisoners has increased the disaffection and anger among some young people, particularly those from a conservative religious background.

Another serious problem is the growing disaffection and anger among young Shiites in the Eastern Province. I found Shiite youths feeling deeply alienated from and rejected by their Sunni peers. They have little hope for improvements in their situation. And perhaps because of the discrimination they face and rejection they feel, young Shiites have a more highly developed political consciousness than their Sunni peers. They also have no qualms about open dissent and have staged regular street demonstrations over the past two years, some of which turned violent. Though not poised for violent revolt right now, they are increasingly susceptible to those aiming to stoke sectarian tensions.

Lastly, as the number of Saudi twentysomethings swells to an all-time high over the next few years, the Saudi monarchy will be passing through a critical phase, which is the transition from an older generation of the royal family to the next generation. King Abdullah and his presumed successor, Crown Prince Salman, are both in ill health. Their deaths will raise the issue of who among the younger generation of princes will be the first to become king. Many young people are anxious about this time and fear that factional infighting within the royal family might get out of hand, placing the kingdom's unity in danger.

"Most Saudis are worried about the time after King Abdullah," said a 21-year-old. "Inside the royal family there is a fight... Everyone wants to be the king."

The next decade will be an increasingly bumpy and challenging time for the Saudi government as it seeks to accommodate the political, economic, and social aspirations of its youth. Far more than previous generations, Saudi young people today are being shaped by forces beyond the government's control, such as globalization, the information revolution, increasing exposure to other cultures, and expanding educational levels. And because of their numbers, they are poised to have dramatic effects on the kingdom in many ways: economically, socially, religiously, educationally, recreationally, and even politically.

Certainly, they will be decisive in whether the kingdom can transform itself into a competitive, globally-connected economy and a dynamic, creative society in a turbulent, complex 21st century. Obviously, that transformation will require that young Saudis are given a lot more intellectual freedom and space to be creative than they now have.



The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Woodrow Wilson Center.

i I am indebted to demographer Richard Cincotta for this population data.

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