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March 15, 2005

BETWEEN THE INTERNATIONAL HAMMER AND THE LOCAL ANVIL: MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN SAUDI ARABIA

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The Saudi municipal elections, which began on February 10, have provoked glib predictions of “the first step on the road to democracy.” Yet the elections represent simply another – and for the time being – successful coping mechanism for a skilled royal family that has ruled almost continuously for 250 years.

Since 9/11, the Saud family has been caught in a pincer movement -- from without, by the Bush Administration, reinforced by seeming successes in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Palestinian Authority, which has called for an end to “decades of excusing and accommodating tyranny in the pursuit of stability” and has specifically put authoritarian allies like Egypt and Saudi Arabia on notice; from within, by an emboldened reform movement of Islamists and liberals demanding more participation in decision-making.

The Al Saud faced similar challenges in the 1990s following Saddam Husayn’s invasion of Kuwait. At that time, a reform movement emerged in the Kingdom and the regime was forced to establish an appointed Consultative Council. However, the family also stipulated that succession would remain in the House of Saud and would pass from the sons of founder Abd al-Aziz to his grandsons. Only the King

would be able to appoint his Crown Prince. Thus, the balance that characterized Saudi policy was maintained; some very limited participation would be permitted, but the ultimate authority of the family was formally codified.

On February 10, Saudi Arabia began a series of elections for half the members of 178 municipal councils in the country’s thirteen provinces (the other half are appointed by the government). Saudi males over twenty-one are eligible to vote and run for office (women are promised the vote in the next election, scheduled for 2009). Elections are being held in three rounds: the first in Riyadh province, the second, on March 3, in Baha, Najran, Asir, Jizan and the Eastern Province, and the third, on April 23, in the provinces of Medina, Northern Borders, Qasim, Jawf, Mecca, Ha’il, and Tabuk. Although similar elections were held in the 1950s and early 1960s, for most Saudis today, this is the first exercise in electoral politics in living memory.

In Riyadh Province, only 140,000 people registered to vote. This low level may be attributed to the relatively short lead-time for registration, unfamiliarity with procedures, fear of being written down somewhere in the government’s books, and perhaps general apathy at voting for only half of municipal councils with



Published by TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies & The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
through the generosity of Sari and Israel Roizman, Philadelphia

www.tau.ac.il/jcss/

www.dayan.org/

limited powers; positions with some real power, such as mayor, are appointed by the King. Nevertheless, voter turnout was high (73.6% of registered voters). And although no parties were allowed and candidates – mostly wealthy businessmen and academics -- ran as individuals, some did form groups and urged people to vote for an entire slate.

The elections created a space for a new kind of public activity. Campaigning was spirited and involved large public gatherings, newspaper ads, huge billboards, internet advertising, and SMS messages to cellular phones. While issues were restricted to municipal matters, there was a widespread sense that something important was happening. Islamist candidates swept the elections in Riyadh City, provoking complaints by some of the losers about clerical intervention. And in the face of a jihadist insurgency since May 2003, the regime did try to enlist support for elections among dissident clerics, some of whom had been jailed in the past. Shaykh A'idh al-Qarni, previously a strong opponent of the government, was recruited to explain that such elections are entirely in keeping with Islam. Another former dissident and now sometime supporter of regime policies, Shaykh Salman al-Awda, spoke on behalf of some moderate (in Saudi terms) Islamist candidates. In other respects, however, the regime took a low-key approach to the elections, putting them under the supervision of a relatively minor ministry (albeit one headed by a prince).

In the heavily Shi'i Eastern Province, voter registration and turnout tended to be higher. This was probably due to the energizing effect of Shi'i electoral successes in Iraq at the end of January. Like their Iraqi co-religionists, Saudi Shi'is have a long history of discrimination and powerlessness and they, too, could find in electoral participation a way to assert their interests and voice their pent-up demands and

grievances against Sunni (Wahhabi) masters, as did Shi'i dissident and former exile Shaykh Hasan al-Safar, who spoke at several election meetings. Of course, the Saudi municipal councils (unlike Iraqi governing institutions) cannot promise them any real political power, but even this chance at self-assertion still represents important progress for them. In fact, religious affiliation and tribal and family connections seemed paramount in the choice of candidates in the Eastern Province, and while Sunnis make vigorous efforts to defeat Shi'i candidates, all but one of the contested seats in the heavily Shi'i precincts of Qatif and al-Hasa were won by Shi'is.

Where is Saudi Arabia headed in the wake of the elections? There is no doubt that the regime feels the pressure to respond to calls for reform. But even as elections proceed, three Saudi dissidents who have called for a constitutional monarchy remain imprisoned and their trial is being held *in camera*. And the US State Department's Human Rights Practices Report insists that the Saudi government's "human rights record remained poor overall with continuing serious problems, despite some progress." Thus, the Saudi decision to hold limited municipal elections is not a decision born of a commitment to the values of participatory politics but rather one more reactive step in a successful, age-old tradition of maneuvering between conflicting forces to stay in power. Bush and others may hope that municipal elections are a forerunner of transformation, but for those who actually approved them, this maneuver, like others before it, is intended to preserve Saudi Arabia as a country appropriately named after a family.

KEYWORD: Saudi Arabia