

Socio-cultural Transformation of Saudi Arabia before and after Prince Mohammad bin Salman: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Transformation or Socio-cultural change means a qualitative change. There is change in Saudi Kingdom in terms of economic and socio-cultural transformation. Western scholars have claimed that Saudi society is experiencing a revolution in terms of as broad as they are vague. Saudi Arabia is a very young society, nearly 70 per cent of the total population is under 30 years of age and many of them have attained their education from foreign countries within the environment of an open society. So, their views are more liberal one and they want freer and more open life. The paper highlights the socio-cultural and economic scenario of the Kingdom before and after Prince Mohammad Bin Salman. Vision 2030 is a new Crown Mohammad bin Salman's blueprint for opening up Saudi Arabia to the modern world. It has been promised that the country will return to a more "moderate Islam" with facilities of modern tourism and opening of cinema hall which was closed for last three decades. Vision 2030 outlines 24 definite goals for the Kingdom to achieve in economic, political and socio-cultural development. The vision further articulates 18 commitments to achieve these goals with various initiatives. Development in Saudi Arabia is not a recent phenomenon. It is a steady project of modernization, in which each generation builds on the progress of its predecessor.

Key Words : Transformation, Saudi Kingdom, Socio-cultural, Vision 2030

INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia is located in the West Asia and occupies the fourth-fifth of the Arabian Peninsula, with an area of 21,49,690 square kilometres (14th largest country of the world). Saudi Arabia is bordered on north by Jordan, Iraq and Kuwait, on the south by Yemen, on the east by Oman, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and the Persian Gulf, and on the west by the Red Sea. The total population of the Kingdom was about 33 million (2017). The country is the centre of the Islamic world because of the location of two holy mosques in Makkah and mosque of Medina. Saudi Arabia has one of the warmest climates in the world as it is located within the arid zone, where temperature in the summer is very high and the region is mostly rainfall deficit as evaporation exceeds the rainfall. The country does not have rivers except few wadis in the mountainous

region. More than 70 per cent of the total population are under 30 years of age. Nearly 78.4 per cent of the total population live in urban part of the country. There are few cities that have million plus population in the Kingdom namely, Riyadh 6.7 million, Jeddah 3.6 million, Dammam 2.05 million, Macca 1.7 million population and Medina 1.3 million population.

Socio- cultural transformation is the drastic and qualitative change of social and cultural set-up in which there is change in social norms, food habit and life-style. Cultural change and transformation means a qualitative change from traditional culture to modern one. Any change may face many difficulties; problems of cultural conflict and anti-progress currents will become apparent even as the changes occur. Religious activists have been able to discuss their own perceptions and the frameworks of their belief through contact with the spirituality of the

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people. There is change in Saudi Kingdom in terms of economic and socio-cultural transformation. Western scholars have claimed that Saudi society is experiencing a revolution in terms of as broad as they are vague. Vision 2030 is a new Crown Mohammad bin Salman's blueprint for opening up Saudi Arabia to the modern world. It has been promised that the country will return to a more "moderate Islam" with facilities of modern tourism and opening of cinema hall which was closed for last three decades. Vision 2030 outlines 24 definite goals for the Kingdom to achieve in economic, political and socio-cultural development. The vision further articulates 18 commitments to achieve these goals with various initiatives. Development in Saudi Arabia is not a recent phenomenon. It is a steady project of modernization, in which each generation builds on the progress of its predecessor.

The discovery of oil in 1938 brought about a new era of development for the Saudi Arabia that boosts the economy of the Kingdom. Before the discovery of oil and gas fields, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was isolated and alienated from other part of the worlds because it was mostly dependent on meagre agricultural practices for the survival. The oil boosts has prompted many changes within the Saudi society. Economic condition, education, health, transportation and life styles are among those areas that have been affected by the start of oil production.

Objective of the study:

- To evaluate the socio-cultural reforms that has taken place before prince Mohammad bin Salman.
- To examine the socio-cultural transformation of the Saudi Arabia brought about by the prince Mohammed bin Salman.

METHODOLOGY

The study is primarily based on secondary sources of data however researcher has taken relevant materials regarding the study. The method of study is descriptive, exploratory and analytical. All the information and content gathered through critical analysis of available related literature. Ideas and opinion of versatile scholars and columnists published by national international newspapers has also been considered for the analysis. The report published by government of Saudi Arabia (Saudi Arabia, Political, Economic and Social Development report-2017) has been analysed.

Transformation of Saudi before MBS:

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The life expectancy of Saudi citizens has dramatically and positive increased from 52.7 years to 75.05 years in 2015. In 55 years, the infant mortality rate plummeted in Saudi Arabia as a result of far-reaching improvements in health practice. In 1960, there were 292 deaths per 1000 live births in Saudi Arabia. By 2015, the number fell to 13 deaths per 1,000 live births. In the year 1970 only 8 per cent of the adult population of Saudi Arabia was literate. By 2014, over 94.4 per cent of Saudi citizens were considered literate by UN. The female literacy is more than 90 per cent but narrowly lesser than male counter parts. In 1980, Saudi Arabia maintained a Human development Index value of 0.575, in comparison to its 2014 value of 0.837 that shows the comprehensive change in attitude of the Kingdom.

There have always been promises and assurance by the Royal for change in the kingdom. No doubt Saudi has achieved socio-economic development due to boom in oil prices after 1970, but nothing genuine was accomplished as it clear from the rule and regulations. If we see the Era of 1970 we find that only 8 per cent of the adult population of Saudi Arabia was literate and by 2014, over 94.4 per cent of Saudi citizens were considered literate by UN. In 1980, Saudi Arabia maintained a Human development Index value of 0.575, in comparison to its 2014 value of 0.837 that shows the comprehensive change in attitude of the Kingdom. There is also increase of women's workforce participation in the country Traditional methods were used and in the decade of 1970s more than 90 per cent countries food were imported from other countries. In 1978, wheat production was 3000 tons while in 1989 it increased to 3 million tons.

Development in Saudi Arabia is not a recent phenomenon. It is a steady project of modernization, in which each generation builds on the progress of its predecessor. The following fields can be used to find out the socio-cultural improvement before the domination of Prince MBS:

1. Industrialization

2. Per Capita Monthly Income
3. Educational Institutions
4. Health Care Facilities
5. Agricultural Development:

Saudi Arabia after MBS:

Thirty-three-year-old Mohammed bin Salman has just started to set the agenda in Saudi Arabia for decades to come. It is only because of Mohammad bin Salman that there is drastic change and transformation in social and cultural aspect of the society. There has been demand from long time for social reforms which are now being ushered in part to soothe the bitter experiences of the past.

The kingdom has been badly hit by a global plunge in oil prices since 2015. Vision 2030 is new Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's blueprint for opening up Saudi Arabia and its economy to the modern world. It has so far encompassed a raft of wide-ranging reforms, and even a promise the country will return to a more "moderate" Islam. There have always been promises and declaration by the Royal for change in the kingdom, but nothing genuine was accomplished as it clear from the rule and regulations.

Former Congressman Eric Cantor briefly mentioned that the opening up economic sectors to foreign investors will be crucial for the economic growth of the Kingdom. This reform effort will also initiate the social transformation of the society. Within the framework of Vision 2030, he is making changes that many Saudi citizens have waited their entire lives to see. Saudi Arabia is a very young society: 70 percent of the population is under 30 years of age, and many of them have studied abroad and now want to lead a newer, freer, more open life. The young crown prince considers himself to be the mouthpiece of this young society. Up until now, these changes have been welcomed, almost to the point of exhilaration.

The socio- cultural transformation of the Kingdom under MBS may be summarized under following heads:

Emphasis on Gender Equality:

In addition to the highly publicized cinema re-opening, Saudi Arabia opened its first Comic Con in February 2017, and held its first ever concert by a female performer in December 2017. Opening of public places for women participation, where women can enjoy comedy along with hot coffee and tea. In spite of this egalitarian rhetoric, a marked improvement in women's rights is unlikely to occur

in the short-term. In spite of increased state support for female employment, a June 2017 study on female workforce participation in Saudi Arabia revealed that only 17.3 percent of the women worked. This is only a slight increase from the 14.4 percent registered in 2011. Although the Saudi government has attempted to create a working environment that allows women to balance their professional and family responsibilities, increasing the percentage of women in the Saudi workforce to 30 percent, as outlined by the Saudi Arabia 2030 strategy, is viewed by many analysts to be an overly optimistic target.

The women are getting benefit most from ending the ban on women driving, in addition to already being able to openly listen to music, attend concerts, and participate in GEA-organized events. The Crown Prince is hardly forcing any of these women (or their male counterparts) to see the value of the new social and cultural openings. Instead, they constitute one of his most important constituencies and bases of support. Princess Reema bint Bandar al-Saud, a cousin of the crown prince, runs the Saudi General Sport Authority, which is allowing and inspiring more girls and women to take part in athletics — in schools, at gyms, or even just attending sporting events like soccer games. She's making the rounds to encourage the changes abroad, but she acknowledges the government and the religious establishment that may hinder the gender and social development. Social media was another crucial factor that contributed to this normalisation. YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat allowed Saudi women to broadcast their lives. It became a space to communicate ideas and creativity, as well as voice demands. Those studying abroad became an active voice in the social media world.

Much more importance is being given by the new prince to integrate the women into the labour market. The perception of Saudi women shows those after getting education they want engage and take part in private labour market as well as other sphere of economic life. Many young women are also pushing for change in gender relations.

Opening of Cinema Halls:

On April 4, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced the end of a 35-year ban on cinema performances. This decision underscored Mohammed bin Salman's commitment to liberalizing Saudi Arabia, and the screening of the film "Black Panther" in Riyadh on April 18 received widespread international

attention. As the cinema re-opening decision occurred just six months after Mohammed bin Salman gave women the right to drive, many international observers have speculated that Saudi Arabia is on the cusp of a social revolution.

The socio- cultural transformation of the Kingdom under MBS may be summarized under following heads:

- Entry of women in football stadium
- Organization of Arab Fashion week in Riyadh
- First ever Concert by female performer in December 2017
- Female Participation in Saudi's growing private sector
- Repealed restrictive legislation that prevents women from travelling outside of the country without male guardians.
- General Entertainment Authority (equal opportunity)

Conclusion and Suggestions:

Although Mohammed bin Salman's rhetoric suggests that Saudi Arabia is on the cusp of radical social change, the Saudi Crown Prince has been reluctant to confront institutional challenges and built-in societal resistance to the implementation of radical social reforms. The continued dominance of Wahhabism over the Saudi criminal justice system reflects a broader institutional challenge for genuine liberalization in Saudi Arabia. Despite this widespread optimism, social change in Saudi Arabia is likely to be much more gradual than Mohammed bin Salman's rhetoric and the Saudi Arabia 2030 strategy would imply. As conservative clerics and members of the Saudi royal family continue to wield considerable political influence, there are many obstacles to Mohammed bin Salman's efforts to separate Saudi society from its Wahhabi ideology, improve women's rights, and create a more cosmopolitan Saudi Arabia. While Saudi women are still on track to gain the right to drive on June 24, the availability of this right has been restricted by excessively high costs for training programs. On May 8, Saudi women launched a Twitter campaign protesting the unfairness of being charged up to 5,000 Saudi Riyals for driving lessons, while men typically pay only 450 Saudi Riyals. This cost imbalance demonstrates that there is still substantial built-in discrimination against women that cuts across the Saudi society, which Mohammed bin Salman's Saudi Arabia 2030 plan fails to address. Saudi women regularly attend fashion weeks in

New York, Paris and Milan. But the kingdom is still highly conservative and there are restrictions on what types of clothes can be exhibited at the Riyadh show — no cleavage, nothing above the knee and nothing too transparent. The audience was female only. Organizers were the only ones allowed to take pictures inside the tent and photos have to be cleared by government censors before publication.

Unfortunately, these new freedoms will mainly count for women from liberal families. Those from families that disapprove of such pursuits can still legally be denied their new found mobility by fathers and patriarchs (be they husbands, brothers, or even sons) under the guardianship system. So there is need of comprehensive change of the half of the society of the Kingdom. The human rights situation remains catastrophic. The number of death sentences and political prisoners has risen sharply once again under the new king and his son. One must not fall into the trap of equating societal relaxations with political ones. MBS will need to codify the laws in a constitutional framework and restrict ability of Wahhabi judges to interpret Islamic law Political repression by the authority will be devastating one. It should not be one man (MBS) vision but it should be collective society as a whole.

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