

Political Reform in Saudi Arabia: Necessity or Luxury?

Bassam A. Albassam

Florida Atlantic University, USA

E-Mail: balbassa@fau.edu

Abstract Since its founding in 1932, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has never had a written constitution or any form of public participation in the policy process and governmental decision-making process. Since 1992, the rulers have been under increasing pressure to formulate a written constitution and to increase public participation in the policy process. As a response, Saudi rulers have enacted many laws, which they claimed were a new constitution for the country. This paper argues that the reforms introduced in Saudi Arabia are empty reforms that put the country's political stability in jeopardy. In contrast, increasing public participation in the policy process will ensure political stability and legitimize rulers' authority. Thus, without political reform that guarantees citizen participation in the policy and governmental decision-making processes, the country's political future will continue to be controlled by a small group of people (the royal family) who often disagree amongst themselves about what is best for the country.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, the Saudi royal family, political and administrative reforms, citizen participation

1. Introduction

Since the foundation of the modern kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, the country has had no written constitution. Instead, it is ruled by a monarchy of tribal rulers, in which the head of the state holds absolute power. Consequently, there are no elections to choose the head of the state or any public officials; the sons of the ruling family hold these positions and the oldest son rules the country. Thus, there is no public participation in the policy process or in the governmental decision-making process. In addition, the public has no voice in running the government or monitoring public officials' work.

From 1992 to 2010, Saudi kings Fahd (1992-1995) and Abdullah (1995-present) announced a variety of laws as part of a political reform in Saudi Arabia. These laws pertained to ruling the country and judiciary reforms. The Saudi kings claimed that these changes would increase public participation in governance and in the policy process. In addition, they claimed that these laws would separate the powers of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the government. Additionally, the kings argued that these reforms would increase the transparency of government work (Abir, 1993; Alrashid, 2007; ICG, 2004; Metz, 1992). However, there have been debates among scholars and local and international civil society organizations over the effectiveness of and meaning behind these reforms. There is also some debate regarding whether these reforms are just a response to internal and external pressure, or a real effort to reform the political system in Saudi Arabia (Aba-Namay, 1993; Alrashid, 2007; Al-Rasheed, 1996).

This paper argues that there is a need for political and administrative reforms to protect the country from instability and have a long-term strategy that organizes the political system in Saudi Arabia for many reasons. Having a clear and written constitution that is supported by the public will provide the country with a stable government and a systematic method of top-level governance. Another reason for the necessity to adopt real and effective political reforms is the fact that the current rulers are elderly and no procedure has been made clear to the public regarding the method of transferring power between the royal family generations.

This paper will discuss administrative and political reforms that have been introduced by Saudi

kings since 1992, as well as the reasons behind introducing these reforms. Also, the author will evaluate these reforms' successes or failures in achieving the purposes for which they were introduced, such as public participation in running the state, transparency of the government work, and separation of the executive and legislative branches of government.

This paper will start by addressing the current political system in Saudi Arabia. Then, different reforms that have been introduced by kings since 1992 will be discussed. Analysis of political and administrative reforms in Saudi Arabia will be presented. The author will conclude this paper with recommendations regarding the future of the political system in Saudi Arabia.

2. The Political System in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is a monarchy based on Islamic law. The king is the ruler of the state and the commander-in-chief of the military. Additionally, the king is at the apex of the legal system and acts as the final court of appeal and can issue pardons. The king appoints a crown prince who has to be a member of the royal family to help him with his duties. The crown prince is second in line to the throne (Al-Rasheed, 2009; Metz, 1992).

The king governs with the help of the Council of Ministers, or cabinet. The cabinet has 29 government ministers who are appointed by the king (Champion, 2005; Metz, 1992; Vassiliev, 1998). Approximately one-third of all such cabinets are comprised of members of the royal family. Key ministers of interior, foreign affairs, and defense are run by members of the ruling family as well. The Council of Ministers is the supreme executive and legislative power where all activities and functions are consolidated. The Council of Ministers makes domestic and foreign policy, financial, economic, educational, and defense decisions; controls public affairs; and supervises implementation of all government affairs (Aba-Namay, 1993; Metz, 1992).

Saudi Arabia is divided into 13 provinces, each with a governor and deputy governor also appointed by the king. All of the current governors are members of the royal family. Each province has its own council, also appointed by the king, which advises the governor (Al-Rasheed, 2009, Heinrichs, 2002; Metz, 1992). Thus, the central government of Saudi Arabia is responsible for issuing and adopting regulations, while provincial governments can only enforce these regulations and laws.

2.1 *Absence of Constitution and Public Participation*

Since the foundation of the modern kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, the country has had no written constitution. There are several reasons for the absence of a written constitution in the Saudi political system. In Saudi Arabia, the Quran (the holy book of Islam) and the Sunnah (the Prophet Mohammad's actions and speeches) are considered the sources of law; therefore, the founders of the modern state have used the Quran and Sunnah as the country's constitution (Ali, 2011; Alrashid, 2007; Al-Rasheed, 1996; Aba-Namay, 1993).

In addition, the Saudi royal family does not want to limit its absolute power with a written constitution. They want to be the final authority, even though Islamic law, which they claim to follow, supports public participation and consultation in running the government (Al-Rasheed, 1996). According to the Islamic system, the public has the power to choose its rulers and there is no absolute power but God (Ali, 2001), which is not present in the political system in Saudi Arabia. In addition, many of the actions and speeches of the Prophet Mohammad supported the role of the public in running the government and electing rulers (Ibn Kathir, 2000).

Furthermore, because the Saudi people are generally conservative, their religious figures can influence public opinion; thus, the rulers have an informal agreement with the religious leaders. This agreement guarantees authority and power to the royal family and prestige and religious influences to religious figures (Aba-Namay, 1993; Al-Rasheed, 1996). According to Aba-Namay, "for the last half-century, the Kingdom has been held together informally through an alliance between the royal family and the traditional religious leaders" (p. 295). Thus, the royal family maintains that adopting the Quran as the source of law and guaranteeing the support of religious figures in a conservative society negates the need for a written constitution or for the public to have a more substantial role in shaping the country's political system.

Also, the rulers have been using the country's wealth (predominantly oil revenues) and the combination

of resources and the relatively small population of Saudi Arabia to create a high standard of living, which gives the public a sense of complacency, making them less likely to complain about their lack of political participation. Thus, the rulers buy people's silence (diverting people's attention from demanding political participation) by providing people with high standards of living (Whitaker, 2009).

Until 1992, there were no strong voices opposing the current system of government or pressure for political and administrative reforms. So, what makes 1992 a critical date in the Saudi political system? Or in other words, what changed then to make citizens want to enforce the rulers in Saudi Arabia to introduce political and administrative reforms in 1992 and the following years?

3. Reasons Behind the Reforms

If the royal family has no intention of letting people participate in the political and governmental decision-making process, why did they introduce or adopt political reforms in the first place? There are many analyses regarding the reasons behind Saudi rulers introducing the 1992 and 1995-2010 reforms. In the following section, reasons and events that have compelled the rulers of Saudi Arabia to introduce reforms will be discussed.

3.1 Reform Movement

In 1990, some professors, religious leaders, politicians, members of the royal family, and public figures published a petition asking the king at that time (King Fahd) to reform the political system in Saudi Arabia. The petition asked, among other points, for increased public participation in running the government and to fight corruption. This movement came about as a result of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, which led to the second Gulf War. This war had two major consequences for Saudi Arabia. First, it revealed a high level of government corruption, especially in the military when the Saudi military failed to defend the country front from Iraqi forces, leading the Saudi Arabian government to ask foreigner forces such as the U.S. and U.K. to protect the country. Many Saudi people felt this corruption was a result of the absence of a public role in monitoring the government's work (Dekmejian, 2003; Metz, 1992).

Second, this war led the Saudi Arabian people to question the political future of Saudi Arabia and how the absence of a clear and written constitution would impact the political future of the country in case something happened to the ruler (the king) (Alrashid, 2007; Al-Rasheed, 1996; Aba-Namay, 1993). The petition was unofficially distributed throughout the kingdom and published in some Arab and Western newspapers (e.g., Independent, 25 May 1991, p. 12). According to Al-Rasheed:

The secular petition of December 1990 was signed by 43 public figures, prominent businessmen, writers, and journalists. Careful not to be perceived as opposing the regime, or deviating considerably from the Islamic tenets of the state, the signatories stressed the need for the formation of a consultative council, the implementation of the Law of the Provinces, an investigation of the judicial system, the enforcement of people's equality before the law, freedom of the media, the clarification of the role of the Association for the Propagation of Virtue and the Deterrence of Vice, and the amelioration of the status of women in the country. (p. 362)

According to these reformers' views, there was a need for a constitution or a formal statement to address the relationship between the rulers and the citizenry and to organize governing processes. Also, they argued that the lack of a constitution and public participation in the policy process increased government corruption and would have negative consequences on the country's political, administrative, and economic systems. Aba-Namay summarized the main concepts and characteristics of the petition: "A written constitution, which clarifies and details the function of the government, is appropriate. It will prevent government from going beyond the limits prescribed by the written law and regulate the working of the government to overcome its deficiencies." (p. 302)

Some members of the royal family supported reforms, especially those from the second generation, like Prince Alwaleed Bin Tallal, who was educated in the U.S. and the U.K. They believed that reforms would ensure the stability of the political system in Saudi Arabia (Fitzgerald, 2009). According to Aba-Namay, "this view finds backers within sections of the royal family, who are conscious of their country's wealth and vulnerability to outside power" (p. 303). Support for reforms from some members of the royal family showed that there was a conflict among royal family members regarding political reforms. This evidence of conflict within the royal family is unusual, as such disputes are usually kept out of the public eye (Al-Rasheed, 2009; Lange & Reed, 2007).

3.2 External Pressures

External pressures influenced late reforms (2001-2010) by King Abdullah more than early reform (1991-1995) by King Fahd. After the terrorist attack on the U.S. in 2001, the Saudi government found itself under international pressure and criticism, since 15 of the 19 hijackers were from Saudi Arabia. A report by the International Crisis Group (ICG) in 2004 argued that “the country’s rulers, its religious beliefs, social customs, and educational curricula became targets of endless hostile commentary” (p. 8). In addition, the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing war on terrorism, such as the invasion of Iraq and the war in Afghanistan, have placed additional pressure on the Saudi government to start reforming its political system to prevent accusations from the international community that it is producing terrorists (Teitelbaum, 2005).

3.3 The Rulers’ Health Conditions

According to International Crisis Group (ICG), “the ruler’s advanced age and the prospect of succession present another important constraint on reform” (p. 5). The current king, King Abdullah, and all of the senior princes are in their 70s and 80s, which makes organizing the transition of power between generations in the royal family imperative. Steinberg discussed the danger of the rulers’ advanced age factor on courtier’s future:

The challenge now is to find other ways to implement the necessary measures. If the family fails to decide on the transition between generations in the dynasty, in the worst case scenario it will have to select a new king from within its ranks every two or three years, with all the consequences this could entail for political continuity and stability in the country. (as cited in Wurm, 2008, p. 9)

3.4. Other Factors

High unemployment and rapid population growth add more pressure for reforms. In 2008, the unemployment rate in Saudi Arabia was around 12 percent and its growth rate was 2.3 percent. The proportion of younger people in the society continually increases. Forty-five percent of the population is less than 14 years old, and 73 percent was under 29 in 2007 (CDSI, 2008). These demographic facts have created a major challenge for the government in creating new jobs and meeting the needs of the new generation, which includes demands for increased participation in the policy process and in running the government (Aba-Namay, 1993; Albassam, 2011).

The lack of a written constitution and the absence of public participation have produced political uncertainty and a fragile system that is subject to disintegration at the first major political upheaval. Because the country’s political stability is in the hands of one family, any conflicts between the royal family members could have serious consequences for the country’s political stability (Al-Rasheed, 2009; Lange & Reed, 2007).

4. Background of Reforms

Two main sets of reforms in Saudi Arabia were introduced by King Fahd (1992) and by King Abdullah (1995-2010). These reforms were introduced with three promises: 1) increase public participation in the policy process, 2) these reforms count as a written constitution to organize the political system in Saudi Arabia, and 3) fighting corruption. Thus, these reforms, as introduced by the rulers, demonstrated that the rulers recognized the shortcomings of the existing system and intended to fill gaps in the old system. According to Al-Rasheed, “the reforms were, therefore, interpreted as a step towards the restoration of the old political order.” (p. 365)

4.1 King Fahd’s Reforms

On March 2, 1992, King Fahd introduced three major political reforms: the Basic Law of Government, the Law of the Consultative Council, and the Law of the Province. These were meant to compose the first constitution of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Basic Law, which reaffirms the monarchy as the form of government in Saudi Arabia, contains nine chapters. Chapter Two, for example, states that the country is a monarchy in which rule passes to the male descendants of the founder, King Abdul-Aziz bin-

Saudi. Other chapters deal with the state's legislative, judicial, executive, and regulatory authorities. Although, the 1992 reform claim that the judiciary remains independent, appointment and dismissal of judges is by royal decree by the king only, which influence the independency of the judicial system (Aba-Namay, 1993; Al-Rasheed, 1996; Dekmejian, 2003; Wurm, 2008). Aba-Namay commented on the 1992 political reform by King Fahd, "in this respect it contains, for example, a somewhat cautious step toward a greater participation in governmental politics, through the restructuring of governmental power and the establishment of the Consultative Council." (p. 303)

The second of King Fahd's statutes, the Law of the Consultative Council (Majlis Ash Shura), establishes a 60-member assembly and the head of the Consultative Council, all of whom are appointed by the king. The council was expanded to 150 members by 2008. The assembly is a policy advisor to the king without any power to hold either the king or the government accountable for their actions. In addition, the Consultative Council does not have any legislative power (Al-Rasheed, 1996; Metz, 1992). Essentially, the Consultative Council is a think tank that studies only subjects assigned by the king, with no power or authority in the policy process or legislative process. Additionally, the public does not elect members or play any other role in this council.

The third statute, the Law of the Provinces, defines the rights and duties of the provincial governors. The Law of the Provinces divides the kingdom's 13 provinces into governorates. This statute is meant to limit corruption, establish tighter governmental control over financial matters in the provinces, and decentralize some of the central government's duties (Aba-Namay, 1993; Al-Rasheed, 1996; Metz, 1992).

All of King Fahd's reforms concentrated the power in the hands of the king and royal family members. In addition, the king appointed governors, judges, bureaucrats, and consulate members (Aba-Namay, 1993; Al-Rasheed, 1996). According to Al-Rasheed (1996), in spite of the rulers' claims when the reforms were introduced, these reforms were designed to concentrate the political power in the hands of the royal family without any attempt to increase people's participation in the political and governmental decision-making process. Thus, from the 1992 reforms, the public still had no voice in the policy process, running the government, or holding the rulers or the government accountable for their work.

4.2 King Abdullah's Reforms

In January of 1996, King Fahd became too ill to continue running the government. So although Abdullah was not declared king until August of 2005, he took charge of the government's daily operations since 1996 (ICG, 2004; Wurm, 2008). In 1996, Saudi Arabia saw the beginning of the largest political and administrative reforms in its history; however, most of King Abdullah's reforms were economic rather than political. King Abdullah's reforms shared the same promise with early reforms (King Fahd 1992 reforms), which were more public participation in the policy and governmental decision-making process and fighting corruption (Alrashid, 2007; Champion, 2005; Whitaker, 2009; Wurm, 2008).

4.2.1 Economic Reforms

In 1999, the telecommunication and the electricity sectors in Saudi Arabia were restructured, the stock market was opened to foreign investors through open-ended mutual funds, and reforms of the tax and customs administration continued. In 2000, the new investment law allowed foreign investors to own businesses, including in the oil and energy distribution sectors (Albassam, 2011; SAGIA, 2008). According to Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority (SAGIA) (2008), the purpose of the investment law was to open the Saudi market – which had previously been monopolized by the government – to the private sector, especially in power generation, telecommunication, natural gas exploration, and petrochemicals industries. These reforms were intended to reduce the kingdom's dependence on oil exports and to reduce the high unemployment rate among its citizens. In addition, as part of the government efforts to attract foreign investment and diversify the economy, Saudi Arabia joined the World Trade Organization in December 2005 after many years of negotiations (WTO, 2009).

4.2.2 Administrative Reforms

Many administrative reforms have been enacted since 1996; a new judicial system was presented in 2007,

and a transparency and corruption law was passed in 2007. However, only a few of the reforms have been really implemented as result of government corruption and bureaucracy (Albassam, 2011; Alrashid, 2007; Al-Rasheed, 2009).

One of the major administrative reforms was the creation of the Ministerial Committee of Administrative Organization in 1999. The committee evaluates the administrative structure and performance of government agencies and institutions and ensures their financial efficiency. The king appoints its members, most of whom are professors, government employees, and experts. The committee has an advisory role but no executive or enforcement role over the government's work (MEP, 2009).

4.2.3 Political Reforms

Encouraging public participation in policymaking is another major reform. In October 2003, the king announced that elections would be held for half of the municipal board (local council) seats, and the government would appoint the other half. However, it is limited. In February of 2005, the first election process in the history of the kingdom took place (Al-Sulami, 2008; ICG, 2004; Wurm, 2008). "Although the elections may have had some strange features, they should still be valued as the first step towards liberalization; it may look small from the outside, but it has an enormous magnitude from the Saudi perspective." (Wurm, 2008, p. 18)

The elected councils have a narrow mandate that deals mainly with the provision of services. Crucial areas of public policy and financial issues, such as the budget, national security, and foreign affairs remain beyond their authority. In addition, women were not allowed to participate in the election. This form of public participation, which was regarded by many political analysts as a major step toward more public participation in the policy process and decision-making process, did not last long. As a sign of the government's lack of seriousness in establishing a democratic process in the country, King Abdullah announced that the election, which was scheduled for 2009, would be on hold indefinitely, claiming that improvements needed to be applied to make the election process more efficient (Slackman, 2009; Whitaker, 2009).

5. Analysis of the Reforms

The rulers who introduced the reforms in 1992 and 1996-2010 claimed that the reforms would guarantee more public participation, more transparency, and greater separation of powers (Aba-Namay, 1993; Alrashid, 2007, 1995; Nehme, 1995; Wurm, 2008). According to Al-Rasheed, the three statutes introduced in 1990 "were meant to re-establish the basis for government and regulate political participation through the establishment of a consultative council and regional government" (p. 363). In the following section, the reforms will be evaluated to determine whether the government has met its goals and kept its promises.

5.1 Transparency and Corruption

According to the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) issued by the Transparency International (TI), in 2008 Saudi Arabia scored 3.5 out of 5, where 5 is highly corrupted and 1 less corrupted, this score indicates a serious corruption problem. The CPI is a scale that Transparency International (TI) uses to measure the extent of corruption in a country as well as the government's effort to fight corruption (Transparency International, 2008). "Unsurprisingly, Saudi Arabia is also among approximately half of the world's countries that cannot be treated on Transparency International's corruption perceptions index because reliable data is not available" (Eigen, 1998, p. 179). Thus, the 1992-2010 reforms did not fix the corruption problem, which means that the reforms did not meet their goals.

The problem with political and administrative reforms in Saudi Arabia is that some people are above the law. The royal family members and business and religious elites cannot be held accountable for their misuse of authority or corruption. Therefore, the basic democratic principle of equality before the law does not exist (Al-Rasheed, 1996; ICG, 2004; Wurm, 2008). In addition, there are no clear administrative procedures to help citizens and non-governmental agencies hold public servants accountable, where most laws are ambiguous, so tracing violations can be difficult. As Champion noted, "However Saudi politics and society may be perceived, the one thing they are not is transparent." (p. 179)

Another reason for corruption in Saudi Arabia is the rulers' interpretation of Islamic law, which

they try to enforce with the aid of religious figures. According to this interpretation, the king is at the apex of the legal system, so he acts as the final court of appeal and can issue pardons (Metz, 1992). This interpretation gives the rulers absolute power over the law; however, under Islamic law a ruler should be held accountable for his actions (Ali, 2001; Ibn Kathir, 2000). Additionally, royal family members dominate all high-ranking positions in the government without the qualifications to do so, which has an impact on people's loyalty and raised the government corruption level since royal family members are above the law (Al-Rasheed, 2009; Lange & Reed, 2007).

Another reason for the shortcomings of political and administrative reforms is the fact that the government agencies in charge of controlling and monitoring the government's work are essentially powerless and therefore inefficient. All agencies responsible for controlling and monitoring the government agencies' administrative and financial activities, such as the General Auditing Bureau (GAB), have a consultative role rather than any executive power to hold the government agencies accountable for their actions, so there is no real authority for controlling and monitoring the agencies' work (Albassam, 2011; Al-Rasheed, 1996; GAB, 2009; Wurm, 2008).

5.2 Separation of Power

Separation of power is another one of the reform promises; however, the 1992 law guaranteed the king absolute power in running the government (Metz, 1992). Thus, there is no separation of power in Saudi Arabia's political system. The king has power over all branches of the government and no one has the authority to question him. Therefore, there are no checks and balances in the political system of Saudi Arabia (Nehme, 1995).

Therefore, it is clear that in practice the political and administrative reforms that were introduced in 1992-2010 are no different from the old system where there was no written constitution and no mechanism for public participation in the political and governmental decision-making process in Saudi Arabia. Although the rulers promised that these reforms would fill the gaps in the old system, the evidence shows that these reforms (new systems) give the rulers as much power as the old (Al-Rasheed, 2009; Lange & Reed, 2007; Nehme, 1995).

6. Reasons for Failure

While the 1992 and 1995-2010 reforms fail to achieve what was supposed to be achieved, there is no doubt that the reforms of 1992-2010 opened a new era in the political system in Saudi Arabia in the fact that the rulers realized the shortcomings of the old system and the need for new system (Al-Rashid, 1996). In contrast, many reasons can be mentioned to explain why these reforms are "empty reforms" (Nehme, 1995, p. 155). In addition, many actions such as putting a hold on the municipal election by King Abdullah in 2004, have given the impression that these reforms are just a propaganda tool for the rulers to glorify their image as reformers for the benefit of the international community, without any intention of enacting real change. According to Wurm, the reforms that were introduced by King Abdullah, "allowed as little change as was required to meet the minimum demands both from within the country and from the outside." (p. 25)

One of the main reasons for the failure of the reforms to achieve their purported goals is a lack of trust between the public and the government. According to ICG, "the regime's mixed signals – allowing greater debate, taking cautious steps toward change, cracking down on reformers – have led to a host of interpretations concerning longer-term intentions" (p. 23). Accordingly, the indefinite postponement of the next scheduled election, for example, gave the citizens of Saudi Arabia another reason to doubt the real intention of the reforms (Slackman, 2009; Whitaker, 2009).

Another reason for the failure is the fact that many powerful members of the royal family, such as the Minister of the Interior and second deputy of the king, Prince Nayef, were against the reforms, arguing they were "developments" rather than reforms. This terminology is a strong sign that the rulers did not intend to make real political reforms and it shows that there is no intention to alter the existing system to increase public participation in the policy process. As Wurm (2004) noted regarding Nayef's stands against political reforms,

Minister of Interior Nayef was clearly more negative about these reform aspirations. His motto is 'no to change, yes to development.'... Change means changing something that already exists. Whatever exists in the Kingdom is already well-established; however, there is a scope for development—development that does not clash with the

principles of the nation. (p. 7)

Another reason for the failure of the reforms is the political ignorance of the public. For 60 years – since the declaration of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia by King Abdulazizi, the father of the current kings in 1932 – the people of Saudi Arabia did not practice any form of democracy. The absolute and entrenched power of the ruling family has had a major impact on popular attitudes toward democratic participation (Al-Rasheed, 2009; ICG, 2004; Lange & Reed, 2007; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). According to Nehme, “when dealing with political development in the Arab Gulf, one should be awake to the claim that there exist strong anticolonialists forces, powerful ruling elites and weak states, especially in Saudi Arabia” (p. 155). Thus, any effective reform needs to start by educating people on the advantages of raising public participation in the political and governmental decision-making process, such as 1) decreasing corruption by increasing accountability among public officials and rulers, 2) and the positive impact of public participation in insuring the stability of the country’s political system in the long run.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no doubt that the political system in Saudi Arabia is one of the most stable in the world. Since the foundation of the kingdom in 1932, there has been no major political instability; therefore, moderate and continuous reforms are the best way to implement effective political, administrative, and economic change. However, for this stability to continue, many political and administrative reforms need to be adopted by the rulers, such as increased public participation in the public policy process and adopting a written constitution that organizes the transition of power in the royal family. These reforms will ensure government stability and reduce corruption. In particular, Smith (2007) suggested that:

Economic and political development is believed to be dependent upon four sets of constitutional reforms designed to strengthen the accountability of political leaders to the people, ensure respect for human rights strengthen the rule of law and guarantee the decentralization of political authority. (p. 16)

Another reason for the necessity of political reforms is the fact that most of the senior members of the royal family in Saudi Arabia who rule the country are in their 70s and 80s, and the mechanism for transition of authority has not been made clear to the public. In addition, many Saudi citizens are unhappy with the high level of government corruption and the ineffectiveness and inefficiency of government-operated public programs.

Public participation will benefit both rulers and citizens in Saudi Arabia. It will benefit the rulers by ensuring a stable government in the long term and raising people’s confidence in the government. Government work will also be more efficient and effective as a result of increasing “checks and balances” from the public (Albassam, 2011; Mattozzi & Merlo, 2007). Also, public participation will add more legitimacy to the rulers’ authority and guard against instability that might result from conflicts among the royal family (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004).

The rulers of Saudi Arabia need to apply values that ensure more public participation in the policy process or risk further jeopardizing the stability and development of the country. In order to improve the political system in the long term, the rulers must sacrifice some of their power to the public in the interest of creating a more balanced system. Recent unrest and revolutions in the Middle East have raised serious alarm that should be taken into account by decision-makers in Saudi Arabia.

In the end, the question is whether the royal family in Saudi Arabia wishes to stabilize the country over the long term by applying political reforms to increase public participation in the policy process and provide for a written constitution, or keep the current system where the country’s future will be held in the hands of a small group of people who often disagree, and which will only increase public unhappiness as well.

References

- Aba-Namay, R. (1993). The recent constitutional reforms in Saudi Arabia. *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 42 (2), 295-331.
- Abir, M., 1993. *Saudi Arabia: Government, Society and the Gulf Crisis*. London: Routledge.
- Albassam, B. A. (2011). Budgetary System in Saudi Arabia; Reform Needed. In Menifield, C. E. (Eds.), *Comparative Public Budgeting: A Global Perspective* (pp. 257-274). Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett Publishers.
- Ali, A. Y. (2001). *An English interpretation of the Holy Quran*. Bensenville, IL: Lushena Books
- Al-Rasheed, M. (1996). God, the king and the nation: Political rhetoric in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s. *Middle East Journal*, 50 (3), 395-397.

- Al-Rasheed, M. (2009). *Kingdom Without Borders: Saudi Arabia's Political, Religious, and Media Frontiers*. West Sussex, England: Columbia University Press.
- Alrashid, A. (2007). Modern judicial system. *Alsharq Alawsat Newspaper*. Saudi Arabia. Retrieved March 18, 2009 from <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=2&id=10477>
- Al-Sulami, M. (2008). Reform in Saudi Arabia: The Case of Municipal Elections. *Journal of King Abdulaziz University: Arts and Humanities*, 16 (2), 113-135
- Central Department of Statistics and Information (CDSI). 2008. *Statistical yearbook*. Retrieved July 15, 2009 from <http://www.cdsi.gov.sa/showsection.aspx?lid=26&id=162>
- Champion, D. (2005). *The paradoxical kingdom: Saudi Arabia and the momentum of reform*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Dekmejian, R. (2003). The liberal impulse in Saudi Arabia. *Public Administration Review*, 75 (3), 400-413.
- Eigen, P. (1998). Quoted in Champion, D. (2005). *The paradoxical kingdom: Saudi Arabia and the momentum of reform*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fitzgerald, M. (2009, March). Women are restrained as driving force and restricted from taking the wheel in Saudi Arabia. *Irish Times*. Retrieved March 12, 2009 from <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/world/2009/0310/1224242571372.html>.
- General Auditing Bureau (GAB). (2001). *The Royal Decree establishing GAB*. Retrieved 12/2/2008 from http://www.gab.gov.sa/article_e.php?id=32.
- Heinrichs, A. (2002). *Saudi Arabia*. Danbury CT: Children's Press.
- Ibn Kathir, H (2000). *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*. Dar-us-Salam Publications: Houston, TX.
- International Crisis Group (ICG). (2004). *Can Saudi Arabia Reform Itself?*. ICG Middle East (Report No. 28), Cairo/Brussels, July 14, 2004.
- Irvin, R. and Stansbury, J. (2004). Citizen participation in decision making: Is it worth the effort? *Public Administration Review*, 64 (1), 55-67.
- Lange, B. and Reed, J. (2007). *The Saudi Royal Family (Modern World Leaders)*. 2nd ed, New York, NY: Chelsea House Publications.
- Mattozzi, A. and Merlo, A. (2007). The transparency of politics and the quality of politicians. *American Economic Review*, 97 (2), pp. 311-315.
- Metz, H. (1992). *Saudi Arabia: A country study*. GPO for the Library of Congress. Retrieved 12/2/ 2008 from <http://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/>.
- Ministry of Economy and Planning (MEP). (2009). *Institutional and administrative development*. Retrieved March 18, 2009 from <http://www.mep.gov.sa/home/HomelEnglish18Planlch5.htm>.
- Nehme, M. (1995). Political Development in Saudi Arabia: Empty Reforms From above. *International Sociology*, 10 (2), 155-171.
- Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority (SAGIA). (2008). *About SAGIA*. Retrieved 1/2/2009 from <http://sagia.gov.sa/english/>
- Slackman, M. (2009). Saudis' local elections delayed for two years. *New York Times*. Retrieved September 16, 2009 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/20/world/middleeast/20saudi.html>
- Smith, B. C. (2007). *Good Governance and Development*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Teitelbaum, J. (2005). Terrorist challenges to Saudi Arabian internal security. *Middle East Review*, 9 (3), 1-11.
- Transparency International. (2010). *Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Report*. Retrieved 5/14/2011 from http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2010/results
- Vassiliev, A. (1998). *The history of Saudi Arabia*. London, UK: Al Saqi Books
- Whitaker, B. (2009). Hello, democracy – and goodbye. *The Guardian*. Retrieved 9/16/2009 from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/feb/24/saudi-arabia>
- World Trade Organization (WTO). (2009). Saudi Arabia and the WTO. Retrieved 7/15/2009 from http://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/countries_e/saudi_arabia_e.htm
- Wurm, I. (2008). Operation: reforming the kingdom; External and internal triggers of the reform process in Saudi Arabia. Paper prepared for presentation at *the 49th ISA Annual Convention*, San Francisco, CA.