

Book Review

Educational Reforms in Saudi Arabia

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Education System in Saudi Arabia: Of Change and Reforms
By Md. Muddassir Quamar
Palgrave Macmillan, 2021

The reforms to liberalise Islamic Saudi Arabia under King Salman have received some attention in the global media and analysis of developments in West Asia. However, little is known outside the country about the reforms in the educational sector. This is a comprehensive new study of the changing Saudi education system and fills a significant information gap. The author, Md. Muddassir Quamar, focusses on the impact of societal transition on education policy as well as how reforms in education have influenced Saudi society. The book in eight chapters encapsulates various aspects of the Saudi education system and processes.

The interplay among society, monarchy and a political economy based on rentierism has been utilised by the author to examine the evolution of the education system in the kingdom. The value system based on tribal and religious identity continues to remain the dominant guiding force affecting the socio-political and economic lives of Saudi citizens despite transformation after the oil boom. The idea of unquestionable obedience to the ruler stems from the Hanbali-Wahabi tradition. Islam serves as the primary source of legitimacy not only for the state and the ruling family but also for navigating social relations, enforcing hierarchy and preserving social status.

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The tribal ethos-- in terms of the centrality of the head of the family or collective, kin-based social behaviour, social solidarity and economic cooperation-- continues to impact state-society relations. Notably, the idea of social welfare is ingrained within Saudi Arabia stemming from its tribal political culture in which the leader of the group is the patriarch responsible for the welfare of all its members. The social contract since the formation of the Saudi state between the monarchy and the citizens implies that the government is accountable for providing child and family support, schooling, education, housing, healthcare and unemployment support.

In the Persian Gulf region, family rule legitimised by Islamic credentials has led to the continuation of monarchies in the current period. The survival of monarchies is dependent on the willingness to adapt to the social ethos and meet the aspirations of the population. The monarchies, while lacking democratic credentials, have adapted themselves and accepted the medieval socio-political structure through consultation, to preserve political stability and relevance.

Educational Reforms Break with Orthodoxy

The author places considerable attention on Saudi political history and its impact on society and education system. The evolution of the Saudi monarchy is divided into five phases, i.e., early phase under founder King Ibn Saud between 1932 and 1953, the beginning of oil era between 1953 and 1970, the era of planned development between 1970 and 1991, post-Kuwait crisis phase between 1991 and 2005, and the globalisation phase between 2005 and 2020.

The Saudi education system has suffered due to the preponderant role of the Ulema. The emphasis on religious education lacking scientific rigour, the poor quality, lack of accessibility to quality education for the Shiite minority and poorer sections of society, the enforcing of 'suitable' type of education for women, continuing urban-rural divide, preference for expatriate labour by Saudi firms due to lower cost, lack of jobs in the non-oil sector, etc., were its direct effect.

The education system came under international scrutiny in the post-September 2001 terror attacks in the US. The home-grown radicalisation was blamed on the regressive contents in school textbooks, curriculum and pedagogy. Observers noted the hate speech in school textbooks against Shiites, Christians and the Jewish people as well as overemphasis on religious education affecting the quality of schools made Saudis

incapable of competing in the international job market. The international scrutiny situation forced the government to undertake course correction and overhaul the curriculum.

The book encapsulates the Saudi policy approaches towards education and identifies the causal factors, including the need for a skilled workforce, petitions in the post-Kuwait crisis phase, curbing the growing trend of radicalisation, that contributed to facilitating reforms. In the post-2001 period, civil society groups played an assertive role in opening the discussion on quality, accessibility and need for new curriculums that remove the discriminatory texts against the Shiite minority and expand the academic and professional space for women. The role of the youth and changing perceptions towards their own society, religion and outside world created an atmosphere for social change. The monarchy, in response to the changing social dynamics and to preserve its legitimacy, initiated thereforms despite objections from the Ulema. It also nurtured a parallel decision making in education policy, gradually reducing the Ulema's role.

In terms of the education policy, the effect of social changes can be seen on policy level, such as focusing on quality education, opening to private education, setting up of co-educational institutions, the appointment of women officials and one deputy minister in the education ministry, etc. In the field of higher education, steps are being taken to balance between religious education and globally competitive scientific training and inclusive education. New universities and schools are being set up in the Eastern province and a more sensitive approach is being adopted towards the needs of the Shiite population.

The author provides an extensive trajectory of school and higher education, vocational training, religious studies and science and technology. The book evaluates the reforms in school and higher education in the first two decades of the 21st century and explores the challenges in terms of hindrances posed by the Ulema. The author dissects the goals of reform projects such as the Comprehensive Educational Assessment Project (1996), Ten Year Strategic Plan, 2004–2014 (2003) and King Abdullah Public Education Development Project (Tatweer) (2005) and addresses its effectiveness. The subject of school education is emphasised in the government's Vision 2030 document, including active engagement with parents, teachers' training, public-private partnership in school management, and introduction of vocational skills to meet the demands of the labour market.

The book draws considerable attention to women's education and how women have managed to navigate in the Saudi religious state. The role of education in addressing gender parity and accessibility has been discussed. The author says the reliance on oil in Saudi society and market, in fact, contributed to confining women's space in the economic sphere. Women prior to the oil boom were an important part of the agricultural workforce and enjoyed considerable freedom and mobility within the patriarchal set-up. Their access to education was confined to religious studies which gradually expanded to medicine. The general education over a period has come under the control of technocrats under the Ministry of Education; the Ulema, however, were obstinate about giving up control over women's education.

A crucial aspect was the role of female members of the royalty that pushed for measures on women's empowerment. The monarchy's intention to invest in women's education is based on increasing their participation in the workforce and reducing dependency on expatriate labour. The Vision 2030 emphasises the need for investment in women's education. The author discusses the role of women in different sectors such as economy, family, health, media, arts, fashion, politics, civil society, judiciary, sports, etc. The debate about women's rights has become more nuanced after Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman assumed political power. He acknowledged the impediments caused by the Islamisation policy and pushed for a controlled social opening.

Reduced Role of the Ulema

The interaction and relationship between education and religion have been well analysed. The book interrogates the extent to which both education and religion have influenced each other. The author notes that the younger population is more receptive to the ideas of social justice and civil rights. They have greater opportunities to pursue art, literature, films, photography, sports, etc., and can explore new forms of social expressions.

Saudi Arabia is not untouched by market forces and globalisation that have had a profound influence on society. Notably, individual Kings and Crown Princes on several occasions have adopted distinct policies and attitudes towards both the establishment Ulema and independent Ulema. Former King Abdullah deliberately reduced the powers of the Ulema in education policy and administration. The current Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman by implementing economic diversification and social opening

has also weakened the political role of the Ulema. The morality police or Mutawwa has gradually lost much of its influence due to several instances of abuse of power. In the post-2001 period, there was a growing trend of “Islam liberal” Ulema, including Shiites, operating on a democratic, nationalist and non-Wahhabi political platform focussing on human rights, ending discrimination, addressing unemployment, improvement in education and according to women their due rights.

The reform process has altered the power dynamics by reducing the role of the Ulema over public education. The reforms in religious affairs are aimed at streamlining the functioning of the system. Moreover, several national and interfaith dialogues were conducted to nurture a culture of debate and dialogue and create a collective response against growing extremism. At the school level, the administration and the curriculum have been transferred from the Ulema to the Ministry of Education. In terms of higher education, the curriculum of religious universities is no longer limited to Islamic studies and history but includes a range of subjects, including medicine, sciences, computer sciences, engineering, social sciences, etc. The aim is to meet the increasing demand for quality education, complement the job market and curb extremism. The overall drive towards scientific education and promoting a knowledge-based society has been a key development within the Saudi educational sphere.

The influence of the Ulema has been restricted to regulations and administration of only religious institutions. Islam continues to remain the primary cultural force; however, there has been a gradual shift from conservatism to moderation in the education system. The author says that the reform initiatives rooted in the Saudi social milieu and economic requirements have succeeded in removing the hindrances without a major rupture in the education system.

The book delves into the socio-political and economic rationales for initiating reforms and addresses the interplay of various socio-economic and political factors in Saudi Arabia’s education policy. The author has managed to debunk the superficial approach pursued by western observers based on prejudices and treatment through the orientalist lens, which lacks a nuanced understanding of Saudi history, society and people.

Missing Elements

While the themes in the book are well covered and analysed , the author has

narrated the key events on several occasions, causing repetitions. The author also touched upon the Vision 2030 document and addressed the section on education. The critique of the Vision 2030 and its feasibility, however, is not well documented. The book also mentions the push for modernisation under King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, but the political intention behind the move is missing in the discussion. Saudi Arabia is a key promoter of Wahabi religious doctrine and finances highly conservative religious schools in different parts of the world. An in-depth discussion of the political and strategic impact of Saudi Arabia's educational outreach at the global level is also missing in the book.

The literature on Saudi Arabia largely revolves around its regional, global and energy policy. The book offers a rare glimpse into its domestic politics, policymaking structure and processes, history and society. The author has done a commendable job in filling the gap in analysing the evolution and changes in the education system and evaluating its impact on society. The timing of the book is opportune for an in-depth understanding of a crucial regional power in India's extended neighbourhood. The book would be a valuable addition to the field and is a must read for scholars and policy makers who are interested in Saudi Arabia, Persian Gulf politics and the West Asian region.