

Saudi Arabia's domestic sectarian politics

By Madawi al-Rasheed

■ Executive summary

The Saudi regime has a vested interest in the Saudi public remaining fragmented and unable to bridge the Sunni-Shia sectarian divide. Both Shia and Sunnis in Saudi Arabia have been invigorated by the ongoing Arab uprisings, and in their own regions have staged minor protests demanding similar rights. However, the regime's entrenched sectarian propaganda has succeeded in isolating the Shia and delaying a confrontation with Sunni Islamists. In the short term this may be a successful strategy, but in the long term it may fail to contain the frustration of Saudis who want serious political reform.

Faced with the unprecedented Arab uprisings of 2011, Saudi Arabia feared the domino effect of the mobilisation of youthful masses across the region. Instead of responding to the challenges of a new era by introducing political reforms at home and engaging with regional changes in a positive way, the regime moved towards sectarian politics. This has enabled it to suppress domestic calls for political change, isolate the Shia minority and delay Islamist mobilisation. The main objective of such sectarian politics is to fragment the public at home and abroad by creating dividing lines in terms of sectarian differences, mainly the Sunni-Shia divide.

Sectarianism at the domestic level

On the surface Saudi Arabia appears to be an island of tranquillity in an agitated Arab sea. Yet the veneer of calm was shattered when serious under-reported clashes between security forces, on the one hand, and both Shia and Sunni activists, on the other, erupted in different parts of the country over the last two years.

In the Shia-dominated Eastern Province confrontation with the regime over basic religious and political rights is not new. Since the 1950s the region has witnessed high levels of mobilisation. During the labour strikes in the 1950s and 1960s and the religious protest in the 1980s the Saudi Shia minority, estimated at 2 million out of a population of 23 million, organised mass protests. Grievances often revolved around religious freedom, the end of discrimination,

economic equality and political representation, all denied by the Saudi regime. While increasing repression had always been an option, in 1994 the regime recognised the importance of improving the infrastructure of the Shia region and allowing them limited religious freedom to practise their rituals, at least in their own areas. Many exiled Shia activists reconciled with the regime and returned to Saudi Arabia, benefitting from royal pardons and the promise of being reintegrated into the country's booming oil sector. Only a small group of activists preferred to remain in exile in London and Washington.

However, the Arab uprisings of 2011, especially in neighbouring Bahrain with its Shia majority, invigorated the Saudi Shia community, which had become disillusioned with unfulfilled regime promises since the 1990s. In 2011 Shia activism resurfaced with more radical demands. The mobilisation was initially centred on the rights of political prisoners held in Saudi jails for more than a decade without trial, better living conditions and economic benefits. On several occasions demonstrators denounced the regime and called for its downfall, echoing similar demands across the Arab world. This was expressed by burning photographs of senior members of the ruling Al Sa'ud family, writing graffiti on walls and posting slogans on social networking media. The regime responded with increased repression against peaceful demonstrators, which resulted in more than 17 deaths among young activists between 2011 and 2013. The Ministry of the

Interior issued new lists of wanted activists, depicting them as terrorists, agitators, and thugs who undermined peace and followed foreign agendas. A Saudi Shia religious scholar, Nimr al-Nimr, was imprisoned after giving volatile sermons warning that the Shia would opt for separation from Saudi Arabia if the regime continued its repressive and discriminatory policies.

The regime linked Shia mobilisation to Iran and denied that local deteriorating economic conditions and repression had prompted activists to stage regular demonstrations since 2011. It aimed to isolate the Shia and prevent any sympathy for their cause among the Sunni majority, thus mitigating against the development of a national politics that would unite the Saudi public around a set of basic human and civil rights. Radical Shia activists such as Nimr al-Nimr indirectly served the regime, because, for example, his sermons demonstrated to the Saudi public that the Shia minority could not be trusted and threatened the peace enjoyed by most Saudis. The Saudi media depicted the Shia as a fifth column determined to undermine oil wealth and prosperity. The regime tried to isolate a small radical Shia fringe that took the lead in denouncing the regime. Shia intellectuals, notables, judges, and parents of activists were called on to denounce this radical fringe, pledge loyalty to the regime and sign petitions condemning demonstrators.

The majority of Saudis showed no sympathy towards the Shia and their demands and internalised the regime's narrative depicting the Shia as a fifth column. Both the Wahhabi religious establishment represented by its grand mufti, 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Shaykh, and semi-independent Islamists adopted the regime's sectarian narrative and denounced the so-called Shia agitators. The government-owned liberal press volunteered articles and editorials in line with the government's propaganda and called on Shia writers to pledge allegiance to the royal family and abandon their alleged connections with Iran.

While the Shia situation remains volatile, it has evolved into regular low-level confrontations that attract hundreds of Shia youth, but are restricted to Shia areas. This mobilisation remains confined to Qatif and Awamiya, both of which continue to have a heavy presence of police and security forces. The rest of the country remains oblivious to the daily news about shoot-outs and deaths among Shia activists, thus confirming the success of the regime's policy to isolate the Shia cause and fragment the Saudi public.

Sunni Islamists challenge the regime

Although they showed no sympathy with the Shia cause, mainstream Saudis were affected by the Arab uprisings and the peaceful mobilisations that swept Arab capitals. A small minority of activists among Sunni Islamists expressed their concern over the plight of prisoners of conscience who had been detained for several years without trial. The regime denies that it has prisoners of conscience and insists that those held in custody are

sympathisers of the radical Islamist movement that engaged with terrorism between 2003 and 2008. Relatives of such prisoners staged a series of demonstrations in Riyadh and Burayda, chanting slogans such as "*al-sha'b yurid tahrir al-sujun*" (the people want the liberation of prisoners). These were minor protests compared to those taking place in the Shia towns of the Eastern Province. Yet the regime deployed a disproportionate number of security forces to meet the new challenge of peaceful Sunni demonstrators.

While sectarian politics succeeded in isolating the Shia activists, the regime had to deploy a new strategy to undermine protest among Sunnis. It propagated the idea that prisoners were terrorists or suspects who had been al-Qa'ida sympathisers and had to be held in custody even after serving their sentences. Even if the demonstrators and these prisoners had indeed been connected with terrorism, the regime feared the shift from violence to peaceful protest among Islamists who had not engaged in such new strategies. The Islamist challenge to the Saudi regime has taken various forms, the most important of which is violence. In the past the regime was able to rally society against violent Islamists, but when the latter shifted their strategy towards peaceful protest, sit-ins and marches, it became clear that old-style heavy-handed security solutions would become increasingly problematic if they were deployed against non-armed demonstrators.

In the past the regime was able to retain the loyalty of the Saudi public when it was confronting violent jihadis, but protestors now use peaceful methods that the regime cannot suppress with force without causing serious damage to its reputation and credibility. Shooting peaceful demonstrators who are not Shia may have serious consequences. Thus the regime faced the dilemma of wanting to end the wave of Sunni protests without losing credibility by using excessive violence against them. It opted for increasing surveillance and arrests of demonstrators. It quickly passed long prison sentences on activists such as Muhammad al-Bijadi, Salman al-Rushudi, Muhammad al-Qahtani, and 'Abd Allah al-Hamid, founders of the Saudi Human and Civil Rights Association (HASM). All these activists were accused of encouraging relatives of political prisoners to demonstrate in a country where demonstrations and civil society are still banned. A mixture of Islamists and liberals, HASM activists fiercely criticised the government-appointed judiciary and the Ministry of the Interior. They publicised torture in Saudi prisons and called for an independent judiciary. The HASM had the potential of nurturing national concerns that cut across the sectarian Sunni-Shia divide, and by its adoption of peaceful means of protest it represented a real threat to the regime. Saudis of all persuasions followed the trials of the HASM's founders on Twitter and YouTube for several months, which culminated in 2013 with long prison sentences being imposed on them. A small group of sharia religious scholars and activists continued to challenge the regime when they announced in 2011 the formation of an Islamist party known as Hizb

al-Umma. Several founding members of this party were immediately put in prison for establishing an illegal organisation.

Among Sunni Islamists, a new shift is clearly taking place. This shift is inspired by the potential presented by peaceful protest in the Arab world. Saudi Islamists are waiting to deploy these strategies in their own country to gain more rights and representation. They are inspired by the success of several Arab Islamist movements following the uprisings and continue to aspire towards more genuine empowerment. What the regime fears most is any attempt to bridge the sectarian divide and unite Sunni and Shia activists around the issue of denied basic common rights. The regime prefers to maintain the isolation of the Shia while appeasing the Islamists with promises to respect the rule of sharia. With the exception of the two examples cited above (the HASM and Hizb al-Umma), the majority of

Islamists seem to have postponed their confrontation with the regime as long as it is not seen as making concessions to the Shia. However, even though the regime's sectarian politics may have succeeded in delaying Islamist mobilisation in the short term, in the long term it is not certain that the Islamists will remain passive at the domestic level.

With the Saudi regime still resisting any demands for political reform such as an elected national assembly or a shift towards a constitutional monarchy, the veneer of calm that currently characterises the Saudi domestic scene in fact conceals major frustrations among Saudis. This frustration can only be contained if the regime shows signs of responding to at least some of these demands. Sectarian politics may be successful as a momentary solution to encircle the Shia and prevent mainstream society from engaging and sympathising with their demands, but it cannot suppress political change forever. ■

■ THE AUTHOR

Madawi al-Rasheed is a visiting professor at the London School of Economics and Political Sciences and a research fellow at the Open Society Foundation.

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