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Developing State-Society Discourse in Saudi Arabia:

The Saudi 'National Dialogue' and the Role of King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue (KACND)

Introduction

The aim of this doctoral thesis is to assess the extent that the National Dialogue and activities of King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue (KACND) represent a viable attempt to address socio-political issues and whether the ongoing National Dialogue process accurately reflects the aspirations and concerns of contemporary Saudi society. This paper attempts to advance our understanding of Saudi Arabia's 'National Dialogue' institution and to appraise its significance by examining the National Dialogue Meetings with emphasis on the shift from ideology-based forums such as national unity and women's rights, to service-based forums such as employment and health. It also looks at the newly established Cultural Discourse and discusses the impact of this initiative as a space for ideological debate. Finally, it considers the consequences of the National Dialogue and the impact that it may be having on socio-political discourse in the Kingdom.¹

The King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue

In June 2003, Crown Prince Abdullah accepted the conclusions of the first 'National Meeting for Intellectual Dialogue' which brought together intellectuals from a diverse range of Saudi constituencies. Following this first 'National Dialogue', and partly in response to petitions sent to the Al Sa`ud, in August of the same year KACND was established.

The National Dialogue has its supporters and detractors both inside and outside the Kingdom; however, the role of the institution is often either misinterpreted or misunderstood by both Saudi society and foreign observers. Whilst the National Dialogue meetings attract most attention, KACND is also responsible for a wide variety of other dialogue-related activities that involve people across the Kingdom and at all societal levels. Nevertheless, KACND is frequently described as representing nothing more than a state sponsored public-relations exercise whose principle function is to absorb societal frustration. For this reason it has been labelled 'pseudo-democracy' as it would appear that the institution has little or no influence on government policy or decision-making.² Yet even its most vociferous critics admit that any form of state-society dialogue is better than none and that the National Dialogue may resonate, to varying degrees, with Saudi society. It is also recognised that even within the constrained parameters of the National Dialogue process there

¹ This paper is based on doctoral fieldwork in the Kingdom conducted from October 2009 to January 2011. Apart from the collection of documentation not previously brought together, this included qualitative interviews throughout Saudi Arabia with amongst others: participants in the National Dialogue activities listed (male and female), KACND officials, government ministers, lawyers, journalists, focus groups and members of minority constituencies.

² Yamani, M. 'Saudi Arabia's Theatre of Reform', in *Qantara.de*. (Bonn, Germany: <http://www.qantara.de>, 2007), p. 1.

is an indication that the Kingdom's changing socio-political context has made the Saudi government aware that a different response to both social needs and societal frustration is required.³ Supporters of KACND argue that the main purpose of the National Dialogue meetings is to promote socio-cultural understanding and tolerance between different sections of the Saudi population as well as between regions and religious sects.⁴ Faisal bin Mu`ammar, KACND Secretary-General, maintains that one of the main purposes of the institution is to convey the 'pulse of the Saudi street' to King Abdullah. He also says that 'no boundaries' exist within discussions at the meetings although the issue of self-censorship, i.e. the understood 'red lines', is one that many dialogue participants acknowledge.⁵ Al Mu`ammar adds that in order for the National Dialogue meetings to be constructive 'it is necessary that all civic institutions be represented in a forum to give their point of view'.⁶ In fact, the National Dialogue has facilitated unprecedented debate on previously taboo subjects and even though it is tightly controlled KACND has provided a new forum where Saudi constituencies, in particular those from outside the recognised elite circles, have been able to express their views.

The National Meetings for Intellectual Dialogue

Between 2003 and 2010 eight National Dialogue meetings were convened with another planned for 2011.⁷ At these meetings there is a predetermined agenda and participation is by invitation only although attendance is optional. Initially, the meetings were held roughly once a semester; however, since 2006 due to the increase in preparatory meetings held in multiple locations and an increase in participants, both in number and range, the National Dialogue meeting has become an annual event. The forum is usually spread over three days in order to allow sufficient time to discuss a variety of specific issues related to the main theme⁸ and to date the issues debated can be divided into

³ Nonneman, G. 'Political Reform in the Gulf Monarchies: From Liberalisation to Democratization? A Comparative Perspective', in A. Ehteshami and S. Wright (eds.), *Reform in the Middle East Oil Monarchies*. (Reading, UK: Ithica Press, 2008), pp.3-45.

⁴ It was also hoped that the National Dialogue would help curb extremism in the Kingdom.

⁵ Multiple interviews by author (Saudi Arabia: 2010 / 11).

⁶ Qusti, R. 'National Dialogue Chief Says No Boundaries in Forums', in *Arab News*. (Jeddah, Saudi Arabia: <http://www.arabnews.com>, 2007), pp. 1-3.

⁷ Not including the Cultural Discourse or other KACND forums.

⁸ Interview by author with female writer and KACND participant (Jeddah: 05.07.10). KACND contacted her after she submitted her CV online. She states, 'At that time you were considered one of the elite because you were chosen to participate in a meeting'. According to this participant the institution 'creates a thumbprint' by providing everything for the meeting, including KACND literature and even chairs. Each participant is given a paper stating what can be discussed and instructed that the proceedings take two contributions from the female side and then two from the male side and so on.

ideological and service issues.⁹ According to bin Mu`ammar the amount of freedom granted to the invited participants who represent different social segments of Saudi society has been ‘unprecedented’. Furthermore, an indirect consequence of the meetings has been the establishment of new inter-regional and inter-sectarian ties as well as the opportunity for cross-constituency networking.

Ideology and Service-Related Dialogue

One of the more contentious issues surrounding the predetermined agenda of KACND meetings was the shift from ideological debate to service-based discussion. Whilst the official explanation regarding this change cites public support for service-based dialogue on KACND website feedback, many believe that other reasons, including political ones, better explain this move away from sensitive ideological topics. Whilst complaints and increased apathy from some circles greeted the service-related meetings, others argue that as a service-based dialogue concentrates on one particular issue, e.g. health, this discussion is able to bring people together regardless of ideological background. Therefore, these dialogues gather individuals from all sides, and because a service-based dialogue concentrates on one particular issue, this focuses the individual on a specific topic and thus it is argued ideological issues and divides are forgotten.¹⁰ Indeed, supporters of service dialogue maintain that many critics of KACND fail to recognise this point. Nevertheless, there appears to be little or no consensus regarding the impact of the shift on the current National Dialogue process as a whole as the viewpoints of specific groups vary considerably depending on constituency interest.¹¹

Whilst the first three National Dialogue Meetings were seen as an attempt to examine and expose some of the serious ideological issues facing the Kingdom, debate surrounds the viability and effectiveness of service-based dialogue. A prominent Riyadh-based lawyer argues that both ideological and service dialogues are important for their own reasons, but the most critical

⁹ 2003: First National Meeting (Riyadh): *Reinforcing National Unity*

2003: Second National Meeting (Makkah): *Extremism & Moderation: A Comprehensive Methodological Perspective*

2004: Third National Meeting (Madinah): *Women: Rights, Duties and their Relationship to Education*

2004: Fourth National Meeting (Dhahran): *The Youth Issues: Reality and Aspirations*

2005: Fifth National Meeting (Abha): *Ourselves and the Other: The National Vision for Dealing with World Cultures*

2006: Sixth National Meeting (Al-Jouf): *Education: Current Situation and Means of Development*

2008: Seventh National Meeting (Qasim): *Work & Employment; Dialogue between Society & Work Related Institutions*

2010: Eighth National Meeting (Najran): *Health Services: A Dialogue between the Society and Health Institutions*

2011: Ninth National Meeting (Ha`il): *The Media and Society: Reality and Paths to Development*

¹⁰ Interview by author with social commentator and ARAMCO official (Al-Khobar: 16.06.10).

¹¹ Multiple interviews by author (Saudi Arabia: 2010 / 11).

measurement for both types of dialogue is the seriousness in dealing with different issues as this in turn will ‘create public opinion’.¹² Nonetheless, he believes there is a serious challenge facing KACND with regard to the service meetings *vis-à-vis* the legitimacy of the National Dialogue process as many believe that service issues should be the responsibility of respective ministries. Although one academic contends that the differences between the two types of dialogue are crystal clear, in his opinion many Saudis follow ideological dialogue with greater enthusiasm as they consider the most pressing problems facing society to be ideological in nature.¹³ A dialogue participant argues that all constituencies need to discuss both ideological and service issues in order to ‘at least to narrow down the differences’ between them¹⁴ and according to a Riyadh professor this is where KACND can play a crucial role as the institution is able to criticise government ministries and services as officially it stands outside the government sector. She says ‘I cannot see a ministry criticising itself, but KACND is able to do this’.¹⁵

The Cultural Discourse

In late 2009 KACND announced the establishment of a new forum the ‘Cultural Discourse’ which aims demonstrate the institution’s commitment to its social role and duties. The purpose of the Cultural Discourse is to activate the role of civil society institutions in tackling and treating cultural issues and KACND hopes that the new forum will provide an environment that facilitates greater cross-constituency dialogue and understanding.¹⁶ For this reason, the institution aims to convene a Cultural Discourse every six months in locations across the Kingdom although for the foreseeable future it will be confined to ‘the intellectual elite’, however as the series of meetings progress the range of participants could widen depending on the chosen topic for discussion.¹⁷ The Cultural Discourse has allowed more contentious issues such as tribalism to be discussed within a separate framework from the official National Dialogue meetings, but once again participation is by invitation only and is restricted to educated Saudis, intellectuals, scholars, and writers. In contrast to recent service-based National Dialogues, the three Cultural Discourse meetings have examined issues ranging from religious ideology in relation to Saudi society, national unity, the effects of

¹² Interview by author with lawyer, ex-judge and owner of Arab Network for Research and Publishing (Riyadh: 21.06.10).

¹³ Interview by author with academic and lawyer (Riyadh: online 07.10).

¹⁴ Interview by author with writer and KACND participant (Jeddah: 05.07.10).

¹⁵ Interview by author with King Saud University (KSU) lecturer (Riyadh: 29.06.10).

¹⁶ KACND, ‘KACND on the Reality and Future of Cultural Discourse’, in *King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue*, (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: <http://www.kacnd.org>, 2009), p.1.

¹⁷ Interview by author with KACND official (Riyadh: 24.01.11).

globalisation on Saudi identity and most recently, the sensitive issues of tribalism, regionalism and intellectual classification in Saudi society.¹⁸

The decision by KACND to establish a separate forum for debate on socio-cultural and ideology-based issues raised questions. According to a Riyadh focus group the decision was based on the need for ‘a gradual approach to these sensitive issues so that this discourse would not create problems for the country’. However, some individuals remain sceptical of the Cultural Discourse as they believe that this forum is ‘a sideshow’ and was established due to media and societal pressure to reopen ideological discussion. Indeed, the role of KACND has been questioned and concerns voiced that in reality the Cultural Discourse constitutes a rarefied cultural club as opposed to a significant forum for ideology-based debate.¹⁹ Nonetheless, it can be argued that KACND is now in a position to respond to media criticism that highlighted the cessation of ideological debate in favour of service-based dialogue.²⁰

Conclusion: Greater Societal Inclusion?

The National Dialogue Meetings appear to form part of an systematic pattern of specific groupings and issues being singled out and organised by the Al Sa`ud, i.e. a process of socio-political marginalisation that places people in different categories within an organisational framework. Hertog comments that this is detrimental to Saudi society as a whole as it proves that not everyone is ‘supposed to be included’.²¹ Notwithstanding this Al Sa`ud attempt to create functional groupings, at each National Dialogue Meeting new inter-constituency and inter-sectarian relationships have been formed and the debate on ‘important topics long considered taboo is an achievement in itself’.²² In the opinion of a *majlis al-shura* member the National Dialogue process constitutes a ‘huge step’, not just because the dialogue has absorbed societal frustration in the Kingdom, but also because it established the idea that everyone can be involved.²³

One National Dialogue participant contends that the problem is not that the National Dialogue or its recommendations amount to much, but in Saudi society’s inability to understand the strategic intent

¹⁸ December 2009: Al-Ahsa; June 2010: Riyadh; December 2010: Jeddah.

¹⁹ Interview by author with lawyer and ex-judge (Riyadh: 21.06.10).

²⁰ Interview by author with twelve members of a Riyadh *diwaniya* (Riyadh: 05.01.11).

²¹ Hertog, S. ‘The New Corporatism in Saudi Arabia: Limits of Formal Politics’, in A. Khalaf and G. Luciani (eds.). *Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf*. (Dubai, UAE, Gulf Research Center, 2006), pp. 241 - 275.

²² Al Rasheed, M. ‘A History of Saudi Arabia: Second Edition’. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 247.

²³ Interview by author with *majlis al shura* member (Jeddah: 07.07.10).

behind KACND.²⁴ The institution does not wield real ministerial power, but instead ‘its task is to offer a platform so that Saudi people can meet and discuss the future of the country. That is our true role’.²⁵ Indeed, an elected member of the Qatif Municipal Council argues that KACND has ‘provided a forum for dialogue, the momentum for dialogue and space for dialogue’ and although the government has not adopted any of the National Dialogue recommendations directly, the meetings have facilitated better social understanding and paved the way for unprecedented contact between sectarian leaders.²⁶ Certainly, the National Dialogue can also be interpreted as a strategic measure to ease societal frustration whilst simultaneously maintaining control over the content and pace of reform, but the National Dialogue process should not be wholly disregarded as it represents the first institutionalized form of expression of opinion in Saudi Arabia at a time of rapid societal change.

²⁴ Bundagji, F. ‘Dialogue or No Dialogue? That’s the Real Question’, in *Arab News*. (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: <http://www.arabnews.com>, 2008), pp. 1-2.

²⁵ Saudi Gazette, ‘No exclusion from National Dialogue’ in *Saudi Gazette* (Jeddah, Saudi Arabia: <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa>, 2011), p. 1.

²⁶ Interview by author with Shia lawyer and political activist (Qatif: 29.03.10).