

The Son King: Reform and Repression in Saudi Arabia

Madawi Al-Rasheed (London, Hurst & Company: 2020) 394

Dr. Khurram Abbas

Madawi Al-Rasheed is known for her thought provoking and stimulating writings on the domestic issues of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Her writings are essential references for understanding Saudi politics and society. The book largely revolves around the announcement of Saudi Vision 2030, by Muhammad Bin Salman's (MBS) in 2016, and his appointment as Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia in 2017, to the brutal murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018, and its aftermaths for Saudi Arabia.

Her books largely debunk Saudi government's narrative on gender empowerment, freedom of expression and modernisation of the society. Unlike conventional scholarship that revolves around religion, oil, and monarchy of Saudi Arabia, which Al-Rasheed also points out in her introduction (p.2), she develops interesting relationship between social and political philosophy.

Her previous books such as *Frontiers* (2008), *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia* (2013), *Muted Modernists: The Struggle Over Divine Politics in Saudi Arabia* (2015), widely debates on gender, politics, religion, society and history of Saudi Arabia. Her central argument of the book is that the reform process in Saudi Arabia has reshaped into a brutal repression under Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman (MBS) (p.10). To prove her argument, Al-Rasheed has divided her book into seven chapters, an introduction and the future of reforms in her concluding remarks.

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Dr. Khurram Abbas

According to Al-Rasheed, MBS has managed to develop a multilayered strategy to counter dissidence. Creation of death squads, establishing social media wings to demonise his critics and glorify his actions of reforms, campaign to convince international media of a reformist era of Saudi Arabia (p.89), Al-Rasheed has delved on the killing of Jamal Khashoggi in significant details. (p.108) She considers that Khashoggi's brutal killing is a glaring example of the repressive behaviour of MBS towards dissident views in Saudi Arabia and abroad by Saudi nationals.

MBS has launched numerous social, economic and political reforms with the objective of transforming Saudi Arabia into a modern, successful, economically sustainable and politically accommodative country and society. MBS presented himself as a young, energetic, dynamic ruler who represents youth's aspirations and has an ability to materialise those aspirations into reality. Al-Rasheed identifies reason behind MBS' objectives of unleashing a comprehensive reform process in the country. She argues that unlike previous Saudi monarchs, MBS has been elevated to the throne without larger political, institutional and public support base. (p.123) By reforming Saudi political, economic and social systems, MBS wants to create a segment of society, loyal only to him during and after his succession as Saudi King.

Al-Rasheed identifies that Saudi Arabia – the only modern state named after its ruling family - has witnessed largely three significant phases of change, i.e., religious nationalism in the beginning of Saudi state, Pan-Islamism during Cold War and now seeking Saudi nationalism largely retreating from the former two concepts. (p.141) The “Saudi Nationalism” is referred to promise of greatness, the prospects of national rejuvenation and new economic projects and technological innovations in a post-oil era. (p.158) It is an attempt by MBS to gain popularity at home and legitimacy of his rule from the international community.

Al-Rasheed points out that MBS has two parallels in his political life. On the one hand, he is reforming Saudi society, empowering women, allowing entertainment in a highly-conservative

society, while on the other hand, continues purges against the royal family, the Islamists, youth, and feminists. These contradictory policies have tarnished his image in the West. She informs that MBS' reforms programme has failed to unify and forge solidarity among Saudi sub-nationalities, including various tribes, regions, sects and gender. The immigrants have been structurally excluded from MBS reform programme. (p.228-231) Despite claims of women empowerment, many Saudi women have fled from the country due to intimidation of Saudi state institutions. Reforms, especially of women rights, are not convincing enough for Saudi women. Freedom from male guardianship, increased employment opportunities and equal representation in the political institutions are distant dreams for Saudi women. (p.256) If a woman experiences abuse and restrictions within her own family, she has no recourse (p.260).

Al-Rasheed pens down stories and experiences of various individuals in exile who were either intimidated directly or their families were subject to repressive measures of MBS' Saudi Arabia. While highlighting a bleak picture of MBS' repression, the author claims that due to repression, more young men and women are fleeing the country in search of refuge (p.323). Owing to this, she dares to claim that a new society of exiled Saudis, including members of royal family, youth and women have been evolving into a vibrant Saudi diaspora who might challenge MBS authority in future at multiple levels, including at political, social and economic fronts.

Al-Rasheed has overwhelmingly relied upon academic and empirical evidences to prove the central argument of the study. Interviewing of Saudi diaspora has further added credibility to the author's claims. Though, the author has tried to highlight official Saudi version on various developments; however, absence of interviews of Saudi officials and royal family members gives impression of subjective tendency of the author towards the ruling family. While criticising the Crown Prince MBS, the author has leveled serious allegations on him such as using social media as a propaganda tool (p.19), establishment of death squads (p.172-173), ruthless or repressive approach to his critics (p.96), exclusive policies

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for minority sects and immigrants, murder of Jamal Khashoggi (p.213-230), of which he is entitled to give clarifications. However, Al-Rasheed has not interviewed MBS nor did she mention her efforts of reaching out to his staff for interview in her book.

Despite aforementioned weaknesses, the book contains varied strengths. It combines politics, society and history of Saudi Arabia, which expands the scope of its readership. The story telling style of the author transforms this generous volume of 394 pages into a reader-friendly book. The detailed description of Saudi tribes, politics, society, people, youth and women indicates that the author has a deep understanding of Saudi social and political systems, largely owing to her Saudi background. Contrary to optimists, such as David Ignatius and Thomas Friedman, Madawi Al-Rasheed concludes her book by claiming that reforms and repression cannot go hand in hand. The book is a must read for students specialising on Saudi Arabia, academics and policymakers for deeper and a better understanding of the critical version of Saudi politics and society. ■

- The page numbers given in the text for reference are according to the ebook.