



Opening up the Decision-Making Process in Saudi Arabia

by *Mark C. Thompson*

Greater transparency in Saudi decision-making and the emergence of influential technocrats

Although Saudi Arabia has always been a 'technocrat run' state, transparency in policy and decision-making appears to be growing due to the involvement and convergence of increasing numbers of government and independent actors in the Saudi political and economic fields. As a result of the low oil price, the Saudi government is trying to respond to socio-economic pressures by introducing new policies and establishing a variety of new bodies such as the Council of Economic and Development Affairs (CEDA) in order to deal with the contemporary economic environment. In addition, on 7 May 2016, as a part of Saudi Vision 2030, the government introduced a major restructuring of key ministries, including the Saudi oil ministry. Ali Al-Naimi, in charge of Saudi Arabia's energy policy since 1995, was replaced by Aramco

CEO Khaled Al-Falih, who now heads the newly created Ministry of Energy, Industry and Natural Resources. Other notable appointments included the popular Minister of Health Tawfiq Al-Rabiah (formerly Minister of Commerce and Industry), Majed Al-Qusaibi who heads the newly created Commerce and Investment Ministry, and Ahmed Al-Kholifey, governor of Saudi Arabia's Central Bank (SAMA).

But it is not just policy input from individuals within the ministries we need to consider. A growing chorus of input from key economic corporations and institutions such as the research-oriented King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Center (KAPSARC), Saudi Basic Industries Corporation (SABIC) and King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST) are making their points of view heard. Thus, an understanding of the changing nature of overall government policy-making is necessary, in particular since the elevation of King Salman's increasingly influential son Deputy Crown Prince and Defense Minister Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud.

Al-Saud 'vertical' decision-making

Certainly, it is necessary to ask whether Saudi Arabia's 'opening up' of decision-making is possible, especially as government decision-making is usually categorized in 'top-down' terms with the Al-Saud princes formulating and implementing policy. Nevertheless, it seems relevant to consider the extent to which technocrats within formal and informal institutions may be able to influence decision-making processes either via 'bottom-up' interactions or by having 'horizontal' access to the traditional Al-Saud decision-making processes. The question is whether the participation of these individuals and institutions, either in formal or informal capacities, can play a long-term constructive role in influencing Saudi policy-making.

Challenging the ‘top-down’ approach

Contemporary Saudi policy-making comprises different strands: economic, political and societal. The overlap and complexity of these strands means that specialist input is required from technocrats within a variety of ministries and institutions. Moreover, the Al-Saud have always been willing to relinquish administrative responsibility to individuals based on merit, in particular when senior princes lack the necessary expertise.

The emergence of technocrats who are able to influence policy-making is a result of the creation of an intermediate stratum within the political structure that did not exist until fairly recently. In consequence, the visibility of this new line-up of technocrats is being interpreted as the first signs of a shift in power away from the practices of the ‘old-style’ Al-Saud policy formulation. The mission of this (non-royal) technocratic elite is to overhaul government policy-making at a time when the economic realities of the low oil price impact dramatically on government expenditure. At a time of ‘austerity’ the incorporation of highly qualified and often western-educated Saudi technocrats into the national decision-making process has meant that hopes have been raised that voices from outside the traditional elite circles will now have the opportunity to participate in a meaningful way.

In November 2015, as head of CEDA, Prince Mohammed bin Salman outlined reform plans for increasing the role of the private sector and the way Saudi Arabia is governed. Since Prince Mohammed’s advancement, the Ministry of Economy and Planning (MEP) under the supervision of Adel Fakeih has gained significant influence on policy-making. It is understood that the days of the ‘five-year plans that everyone ignored’ are over, as nowadays, it is the MEP that is formulating policy and feeding this up to CEDA.

Despite the limitations placed on technocrats by the existing political system, their elevation to major decision-making positions appears to signify an attempt at increased inclusiveness in policy-making.

Consequences for national development

Despite the limitations placed on technocrats by the existing political system, their elevation to major decision-making positions appears to signify an attempt at increased inclusiveness in policy-making. In a report issued by the McKinsey Global Institute entitled *Saudi Arabia Beyond Oil*, the consultancy firm argues that all stakeholders, including the private sector, foreign investors, and households, will need to be involved in national development. The key issue here is whether the Saudi government is willing to open the national decision-making processes further, including in the energy sector, to those stakeholders who are qualified and prepared to contribute to the Kingdom’s overall national development. Finally, could the growing influence of this technocratic elite weaken, or indeed eventually replace, the traditional Al-Saud princely monopoly on decision-making? As the impact of the low oil price starts to hurt the individual Saudi’s pocket, the issue of who makes the major decisions is being widely discussed in Saudi society.

Mark C. Thompson is Assistant Professor of Middle East Studies at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM), Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.