

The modern kingdom of saudi arabia politics essay



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The modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that was founded in 1932 is a monarchy. Saudi Arabia occupies a significant part of the Arabian Peninsula, with the Gulf of Aqaba and Red Sea to the west, and the Persian Gulf to the east. The Saudi Royal family introduced the nation's first constitution and the legal system is based on Sharia. This paper will discuss Saudi Arabia's political system, government officials, political and economic conditions, and foreign relations.

Main Body

The political system of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy with the King as head of state and government. The King acts as chairman of the Council of Ministers (). But, the King's power is restricted by Islamic law. He does not enact laws; he only issues royal decrees in accord with the Sharia (). The most challenging duty of the King is to maintain harmony among the royal family, the ulama and powerful parts of the society. The formation of political parties is prohibited and so, no elections take place. It is important to note that even though the King's power is hypothetically restricted to the Saudi tradition and Sharia, he must attain approval amongst religious leaders and other members of the royal family.

Occupying almost of all the central state positions, the Saudi royal family dominates Saudi Arabian politics and also parts of the economy. Political decision making is greatly personalized making ties and within the royal family more significant than official status (). The Basic Law introduced in 1993, articulates the government's regulations and rights and sets forth the

system of government, civil rights, and administrative divisions by which the state is run. The Sunna and Koran are the state's constitutions, and both the society and government dismiss the notion that separation should exist between state and church. The King can be removed if a significant part of the royal family calls for his expulsion.

The Council of Ministers is responsible for drafting legislation to be presented to the King (). This council acts on most decisions, however, laws only become official with the decree of the King. The council of ministers has developed to include the prime minister who is the king, five ministers of state, a first and second deputy prime minister, and twenty one ministers with portfolio (). Crown Prince Abdullah has ruled Saudi since King Fahd suffered a stroke in 1995. Crown Prince Abdullah has won praise for advocating reform. Prince Sultan bin Abdul Azzi is the Minister of Defense and Aviation. Prince Nayef is Minister of the Interior, Prince Saud alFaisal is Foreign Minister, and Prince Mutib is Minister of Public works and housing (). These positions give the Saudi royal family control over the government, internal security, defense, oil revenues and budget, and other major areas of patronage. It is important to note that politics in the Kingdom is strongly influenced by two characteristic; petrol and Mecca. As a result, there exist a Ministry of Petroleum and mineral resources and a Ministries of Hajj to manage these significant areas (). In addition to the council of ministers, the Consultative council serves at the King's pleasures. The consultative council does not power to act independently, but it is empowered to initiate investigative hearings, hold debates, and enforce legislation that is government sponsored.

Political and economic conditions

Political parties are banned in Saudi Arabia; however, distinct political divisions exist. The Saudi royal family continues to fill most of the significant political positions in the kingdom, but the Al Saud and the king are forced to rule by consensus. According to (), the ulama, a powerful and large group of religious leaders, ensure that the King observes Islamic law above other considerations. To placate the powerful religious majority of Saudi Arabia's society, the Al Saud pays attention to the interests backed by religious leaders. Alliances made between prominent religious leaders and important members of the Al Saud family have long shaped Saudi's society (). The kingdom's history of tribal organizations has contributed to its political mix. Leaders of prominent tribes still command authority and respect.

Furthermore, the new class of Saudi technocrats and professionals, emerging as a result of the economy's increased privatization, has informal influence on Saudi's government ministers. () states that petitions signed by members of this class have motivated some reforms.

The Kingdom has an oil based economy with the government controlling substantial economic activities. Saudi Arabia possesses about seventeen percent of the world's proven oil reserves, thus, it is ranked as the largest exporter of oil and petroleum products, and plays a leading role in OPEC ().

The oil sector accounts for approximately 45% of GDP, 80% of budget revenues, and 90% of export earnings (). The Kingdom is encouraging the growth of the private sector in a bid to diversify its economy and employ more citizens. Diversification efforts are focusing on telecommunications, power generation, petrochemical sectors, and natural gas exploration. Over

five million foreign workers play an instrumental role in Saudi Arabia's economy, especially in the service and oil sectors ().

Foreign relations

In the Middle East, Saudi Arabia holds a unique position because it is the 'heart of Islam'; it is the home of Medina and Mecca, two of the holiest places in Islam. The Kingdom has strong ties to countries in the Middle East, other Muslim countries, and Western nations such as Japan, and the United States. As the guardian of Islam's holy places, namely Mecca and Medina, the Kingdom hosts millions of pilgrims from Islamic nations yearly. Moreover, the mutual concern over oil prices has led to cooperation among nations that produce oil in the Middle East (). As one of the wealthiest nations in the region, Saudi has pursued aid and development for less developed Muslim and Arab states. Even though Saudi Arabia has at various times, suspended diplomatic relations with Egypt and Iran, among other countries, it still continues to play a leading role in the region. The Kingdom has its strongest diplomatic relations in the Middle East with other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council namely: Oman, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates ().

The Kingdom maintains a thorny diplomatic position between the West and Middle East. Saudi Arabia has constantly sought to defend Islamic and Arab interests, promote Arab unity, and support a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (). The Kingdom has also been a partner with the West in wars against terrorism and economic endeavors. Some in the Middle East and Arab world criticize Saudi Arabia for its enduring relationship with

the United States, which is largely viewed as Israel's most fervent protector. When Saudi called for military assistance after the 1990 Iraqi offensive of Kuwait, other countries in particular Jordan, Yemen, and the Palestine Liberation Organization refused to support the Kingdom. However, in 1995 after the Gulf War, Saudi Arabia normalized its foreign relations with Jordan and Palestine Liberation Organization.

The Kingdom's security and economic relationship with the U. S remains strong, however, the 9/11 terrorist attack placed significant strain on this relationship. In the ensuing war on terrorism, much criticism has been traded over United States press coverage of Saudi Arabia's connections to terror organizations, handling of prisoners, and a civil lawsuit brought against the government by relatives of the victims of 9/11 ().

Conclusion

In sum, Saudi Arabia holds an exceptional position in the Middle East. Its economy is heavily oil-based and the government has a dominant control on all significant economic activities. The Kingdom plays a crucial role of peace-maker in the Arab region, and is an ally of the United States. Its role as a peace maker is evidently reflected in its stance on the Israeli Palestine issue. Unlike its Arab neighbours, the Kingdom does not have any territorial dispute with Israel and is thus more predisposed to mediating the conflict. Its preeminence among the Gulf, Arab, and Islamic countries means that it is a leader in the area.