Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030": Structural Reforms and Their Challenges

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Abstract

This paper assesses the Saudi crown prince's visionary mega-project, "Vision 2030," superimposed as a new form of a social contract to diversify the country's economy and end dependency on oil revenue. The project sets to revive the long-staggering economy and propel the indicators of all sectors above the international averages. Concomitantly, the vision faces a colossal challenge as the kingdom is wheeled by authoritarian monarchical Islamic values that repudiate the concept of modernity, the final corollary of the prince's vision. This paper primarily assesses the education and healthcare system management based on the old social contract and seeks possible changes or restructuring according to "Vision 2030" objectives. The paper also looks into managing water shortages which are doomed to become more acute with the launch of mega infrastructural development projects. Further, this paper found that "Vision 2030" is steadily pushing boundaries, albeit there are impeding challenges ranging from the availability of skilled professionals to social, cultural and religious intransigence. Nevertheless, it can be convincible to argue that the cultural, social and political reformation is conceivable unless the citizenry has a strong will and vision regardless of how tumultuous the transition is, which would, in turn, help in streamlining the economic growth of the kingdom.

Keywords: Vision 2030, education, healthcare, environment, Wahhabism, religious elites

1. Introduction

This paper intends to study the Avant-grande project, "Vision 2030," pioneered by the crowned prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS). The main goal of this vision document is to lift Saudi Arabia to the level of international standards in all sectors of the social and economic parameters and thereby relinquish the country's dependency on oil revenues (www.vision2030.gov.sa). The plan was announced on 25th April 2016 by the prince himself. For an initial impetus to implement the vision document, a vast sovereign fund by an Initial Public Offering (IPO) with a five per cent share in Aramco - the state-owned oil company - has been established. However, being a theocratic monarchical nature of the government, the vision posed a colossal challenge while faring towards success.

The concern that the heavy dependency on oil revenue will jeopardise the country's future economy and prosperity has raised the urgency of economic diversification of the country through the policy of liberalisation and privatisation (Kinninmont, 2017). Realising this, the crown prince has envisaged the nation's visionary mega-project, "Vision 2030." The project aimed to revolutionise and diversify the country's economy, end the country's revenue dependency on oil, create an investment climate for private actors, and attract FDI from abroad (www.vision2030.gov.sa). The project aims to boost Saudi's economic growth rate of a staggering 0.8 per cent between 2003 and 2013, much less than other developing nations. The vision identifies nine sectors that would, if duly implemented, contribute to more than 60 per cent of the country's economy (Gassan Al-Kibsi, 2015). The thrust areas of the vision document include education, healthcare, mining and metals, environment, retail and wholesale trade, finance, manufacturing, construction, tourism and petrochemicals (Gassan Al-Kibsi, 2015).

Further, the vision prospects are much in conjunction with all the components of "Sustainable Goals 2030." Experts gauged that if successfully implemented, the vision will help move Saudi's economy from the world's 19th wealthiest economy to the 15th (www.vision2030.gov.sa). The private sector share would jump from 40 per cent to 60 per cent and reduce unemployment from 11 per cent to 7.6 per cent (Gassan Al-Kibsi, 2015).

However, the success of such a mega restructuring program requires not only large-scale coordination between different sections of society but suitable modifications within each sector. Interestingly, the Saudi Kingdom has a history of jointly governing the country by the king and influential religious clerics. The education system, judiciary, social and cultural norms and family issues are primarily under the command of the religious clerics, and the security, foreign affairs and economic matters are under the king's authority (Kinninmont, 2017). Though the government is politically theocratic and the society is highly conservative, the perceptions on social and religious norms are often debated, and divergent (Kinninmont, 2017, p. 22). Issues ranging from driving right and physical exercise to women are often contested. Similarly, there are restrictions in the entertainment industry and strict rules for tourists (Kinninmont, 2017, pp. 22-30). "Vision 2030" aims to push boundaries in these aspects and bring change in the social and cultural norms strongly intertwined in Saudi society.

To apprehend the socio-political nature of Saudi and to denote the political and religious nature of elites, the realm of scholarship highlighted them with adjectives such as austere (Kinninmont, 2017) tribal and radicals (Khashan, 2017). Scholars commonly used the phrase, 'nanny state' (Al-Rasheed, 2016) or 'reinter state' (Hazem Beblawi, 1987) (Kinninmont, 2017) or 'Wahhabism' (Kinninmont, 2017) to apprehend one's mind about the state of Saudi. Scholars contend that any of these traits stand against modernity (Khashan, 2017) These connotations of Saudi society and kingdom, jointly ruled and dictated by the king and the highly conservative religious clerics, could come in the way of the developmental activities vis-à-vis the country's economy and prince's vision.

This paper will scrupulously delve into three key sectors, education, healthcare and environment, drawing the impetus for the poor performance in these sectors and seeking possible prospects for change. The rationale for studying these three factors is that education, healthcare and the environment, particularly the water crisis, are directly linked to the country's economic growth and are the chief components of "Vision 2030" (Stephen Grand, 2020, p. 17). The fact that education would help the advancement of medical science and thus develop a better healthcare system and bring a solution to the water crisis all these, in turn, contribute to the growth of the country's domestic economy.

The education system in Saudi is predominantly a rote learning method (Note 1) and severely lacks the modern accessories, technologies and methodologies debilitated by radicalism, tribalism and Wahhabism. To upscale the education system, some scholars necessitated the induction of a critical thinking approach, the training of teachers, and listening to teachers' concerns in educational reforms (Elder, 2005) (Allmnakrah, 2020) The healthcare system is still poised with insufficiently skilled health professionals or physicians, poor quality of services and low health literacy, albeit the government has financial resources. "Vision 2030" seeks to bring a solution to these issues by enhancing the participation of private sectors in health services. On the environmental front, drought or water crisis has been a persistent crisis for the country mainly due to the desert climate, absence of perennial rivers and lakes, meagre precipitation and high evaporation coupled with the excessive withdrawal of groundwater, reckless water use and the lack of effective rainwater harvesting modules. Though Saudi has mastered desalination technology, it is expensive. It pollutes the environment, so the government would require alternative options or additional measures to meet the rising water demands in the kingdom.

2. Methodology

Since time immemorial, clerics has been seen as the ruling partner of the Saudi government as there is an agreement between Muhammad ibn Saud and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the former the founder of the kingdom and the latter, an influential religious cleric from whom Wahhabism came forth (Kinninmont, 2017) Customarily, the cleric's influences are concentrated mainly in the affairs of the judiciary, education, family and social affairs; Al Saud controls foreign affairs, the kingdom's security and other economic activities.

Although the clerics, which include the state-sponsored grand mufti and the council of senior ulema (scholars), hold a privileged position in the education system, society's social and religious norms are rather complex, diverse and contested. Though Saudi society has a religious hierarchy, Sunni society has a hierarchy that is not universal. The clerics' influence on their fellow beings depends on their ability and prowess. Shia minority (10-15 per cent of the population), on the other hand, are excluded from the council of senior ulema, and they feel as though they are treated unequally with Sunni fellow-being, and many clerical establishments consider their views as illegitimate. Apart from having strong relations with religious clerics, maintaining religious and social norms is considered an essential onus for Al Saud to preserve his legitimacy. This impression is seen in the king's formal custodian of the holy mosques, Mecca and Medina. Unquestionably, Saudi society has a strong bastion of religious norms, yet it is more complicated than it is usually portrayed (Kinninmont, 2017, p. 20).

Over the years, the Saudi's political delegates have made concerted efforts to bring social, cultural and economic reforms that are time and again confronted by religious clerics. Such reformation could have engendered greater

social and economic liberalisation, including venting more access to foreigners, easing restrictions on women and assimilating more women in the workforce. It also includes reform with the objective to bring more transparency in legal disputes, particularly those incurring economic activities, and the most arduous is the move to link the education system with the economy and labour-market requirement, which is in conjunction with "Vision 2030" (Kinninmont, 2017, pp. 28-29).

This paper will delve into the objectives of "Vision 2030," particularly education, healthcare and water-related issues. The complex nature of religious and social norms, the highly conservative Saudi society jointly governed by the king and religious clerics, and the ideological conflict between the religious clerics and the prince's vision come in the way of economic liberalisation and diversification.

3. Theoretical Framework

The narrative underlying "Vision 2030" can be construed from the perspective of the 'social contract' theory, pioneered by thinkers like Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau (Kinninmont, 2017). They all are convinced that a social contract is something good or necessary to overcome the state of political and social anarchy and provide citizens with civil rights and security. Implicitly or explicitly, they all perceive the nation-state as the default entity of any given social contract (McCandless, 2018). The theory was mainly framed to expound how state-sanctioned their control over their citizens through indirect consent or a general acceptance of its supremacy; how citizens organise themselves to limit the power of monarchy or state and its excessive arbitrary influences (Kinninmont, 2017). However, the narrative of a social contract in Saudi and other Gulf countries does not go in parallel with the Western democratic institutions. Here, the actively debated topic by Saudi scholars argues as resembling with the Islamic concept of *bayaa*; it is also understood as 'allegiance' (Nazer, 2005). Some scholars also named it a 'rentier state,' where the government distributes unearned wealth, jobs and services as largesse to its citizenry without paying taxes in return for their political authority and acquiescence over them. While in democratic institutions, the citizens are required to work productively and pay taxes, which are distributed back at the state's discretion (Hazem Beblawi, 1987).

Time and again, the social contract theory is used in social science literature and is now increasingly used in the study of Middle Eastern countries to analyse state-society relations (Markusloewe, 2021). Traditionally, in Saudi Arabia, people are subjected to acquiescence to rulers' theocratic authority, and in return, the rulers offer public sector jobs and access to free or highly subsidised public services, especially education, healthcare, food items and energy (Larbi, 2016). However, the system offers limited rights to women, cultural monopoly by religious elites or clerics and is not in line with critical thinking. The new social contract embedded in "Vision 2030" spurred women's rights in the private sphere and jobs, improvement and better access to highly subsidised public services, industries, environmental salvage and more, yet with the same inviolable monopoly of the rulers (Kinninmont, 2017). The paper delves into the depth of the rip-roaring "Vision 2030" objectives; how far is it possible to achieve the success of this new social contract in the field of education, healthcare and water security? Is it just a nebulous ante or a phantasmagoria, or is there a propensity of achieving some degree of success if not cent per cent in its entirety?

4. Educational Reform: An Imperative for "Vision 2030"

Education is one sector where the grandiose "Vision 2030" ambition is envisioned. Explicitly, improving the quality of education is enshrined in the vision document as a prerequisite to inducting a qualified workforce into the country's economic activities. The Ministry of Education is responsible for upscaling education standards and outcomes, aiming to take Saudi students above the international standard in the education index; and be listed as five universities in the top 200 by 2030 (Saudi Ministry of Education, n.d.). The aim is to link the education system with the country's economy and meet the demands of the labour market (Kinninmont, 2017). The quality of education, from schooling to higher education and professional education, along with infrastructural facilities, is stagnating and not at par with international standards and averages (Gassan Al-Kibsi, 2015). Mosaad (www.fairobserver.com, 2016) reiterate that the stagnation of education quality is the outcome of old curriculum, inadequate teaching methods and primitive rote method of learning. The "Vision 2030" envisages the urgency for educational reform, particularly the teachers' training, listening to their voices and instilling a critical thinking approach to students and teachers with the sole objective of replacing the primitive rote learning method as explicitly stated by the Prince:

"Among our commitments…education that contributes to economic growth. We will close the gap between the outputs of higher education and the requirements of the job market. We will also help our students make careful decisions, while at the same time training them and facilitating their transition between different educational pathways. By the year 2030, we aim to have at least five Saudi universities among the top 200 in the international

rankings. We shall help our students achieve results above international averages in global education indicators….we will prepare a modern curriculum focused on rigorous standards in literacy, numeracy, skills and character development. …we will work closely with the private sector to ensure higher education outcomes that are in line with the requirements of the job market. We will invest in strategic partnerships with apprenticeship providers, new skills councils from industry, and large private companies. ...build a centralized student database tracking students from early childhood through the K-12 and beyond into tertiary education (higher and vocational) to improve planning, monitoring, evaluation and outcomes" (www.vision2030.gov.sa, p. 40)

Before "Vision 2030," King Abdullah's Education Development Project or *Tatweer* Project, 2007-2013, aimed for educational reform that focused on a wide range of improvements, including the enhancement of teaching aptitude, appending new syllabus in curriculum, adding more extracurricular activities and up-gradation of school infrastructure (Allmnakrah, 2020). The outcome of this project seems unimpressive given the objectives and amount of funds allocated for the project, where the rote learning method is still prevalent in the country's education system. "Vision 2030" embarked on an excellent ruse to end this primitive learning method, transcend other educational precincts, and take the Saudi education indicators and universities above the international averages. Suggestions from scholars for the Saudi education system include taking serious account of the teachers' grievances, upscaling the teachers' skills, listening to their voices and promoting critical thinking (Allmnakrah, 2020) (Elder, 2005). It also includes encouragement and reward system, open-mindedness, rationality, truth and self-criticism (Debbie Walsh, 1986).

5. Healthcare System Imbroglio

One of the objectives of 'Vision 2030' is to improve population health which is in line with Sustainable development Goals 3 (SDG3), (Note 2) 'Establish good health and well-being.' The vision highlighted the need to engage the public sector in preventive care, denting infectious diseases and providing quality health services to the public. Along with reform in the public sector, the government intends to increase the healthcare system's privatisation to improve the service standard.

The vision considers reducing the waiting time before treatment from the appointed physicians or specialists. Physicians would be well-trained with international standards to treat the patients (www.vision2030.gov.sa). The first teaching hospital established in Riyadh, the King Abdulaziz University Hospital, had only a 104-bed capacity. It hinted at how far the kingdom is lagging behind other Middle East countries like Jordan and Lebanon, as the hospitals in these countries are much more accessible and advanced as compared to the Saudi government (Note 3) (Khashan, 2017).

The Saudi government has taken various steps to enhance the healthcare system and services by working closely with the private sector. The government plans to spend SAR 23 billion in the next five years, including privatising 2259 public health centers and 295 hospitals. The government wishes to keep planning, monitoring and ownership of these institutes, but the management is in the hands of the private sector (www.vision2030.gov.sa). The idea of privatisation is to enhance the participation of the private sector from the current 25 per cent to 35 per cent, the objective of which is to deliver quality health services to all Saudi citizens (Saudi Gazette Report, 2017). The government is planning to privatise all public hospitals and promote public-private partnerships (PPPs). In 2018, the government signed a loan of SAR 407 million with the private sector to build hospitals and other medical facilities in Abha, Abu Aish, Buraydah, Dammam, Jeddah and Riyadh (Rahman, 2020).

The reality check of the Saudi healthcare system is that though the government has financial resources, the healthcare system is chiefly dented by limited infrastructure, low standard of services and insufficiently trained health professionals. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and fluctuations of oil prices in the global market has further jeopardised the success of "Vision 2030" (Redwanur Rahman, 2021).

6. Drought and Climate Control

Drought or water scarcity is a persistent problem in the region and is getting worse day by day. The water condition is conditionally worse as the country has the largest arid areas in the region, exacerbated by low rainfall, high evaporation and the non-existence of rivers, streams and lakes. The precipitation usually happens between November and April, and in a desert climate, most precipitated water evaporates (Saud A. Gutub, 2013). Currently, most of the country's water needs are derived from groundwater, which is utilised for all sectors of the economy, including agriculture. The other water supply comes from dams, desalination, rainwater harvesting and recycling or reuse. (Note 4) Because groundwater withdrawal is much more than its recharge, the groundwater supply would be exhausted in less than 50 years if the current withdrawal amount continues (Jorg E. Drewes, 2012). The careless and excessive water use and management, unchecked population growth, the absence of water policy, and years of war have worsened water scarcity (Lippman, 2014). While examining the effects of climate change on water

resources, Chowdhury and Al-Zahrani found that precipitation in the country's northern region would dwindle at an average of 10 mm per year, thereby worsening water shortages (Shakhawat Chowdhury, 2013).

Though water management is not explicitly enshrined in "Vision 2030"; however, it is in resonance with SDG6, 'to ensure water availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all' (Note 5) (UNDP, n.d.). It also comes in the ambit of environmental sustainability and protection, one of the main agendas of "Vision 2030." The government has taken various adaptation measures to reduce the dependency on groundwater. It seeks an alternative solution that includes outsourcing or importing water-intensive food resources, desalination, rainwater harvesting, construction of dams, and recycling and reuse of water. Here, the outsourcing of water-intensive food resources and desalination incurs a considerable investment and contributes to pollution and climate change (Sabine Lattemann, 2008); hence there is a challenge in the further expansion of these measures.

For the success of "Vision 2030," strengthening water security would be crucial for the growth of other sectors, including mining, manufacturing, petrochemicals, healthcare, tourism and more. The existing drought adaptation measures would not be sufficient to meet the increasing water supply demands, so it becomes imperative for the government to seek additional measures.

7. Challenges before "Vision 2030"

Some scholars translated the "Vision 2030" as a nebulous and unsound project, as the state faced the challenges of sluggish economic growth, dwindling oil prices, high unemployment of youth, sectarian tension and a threat of violent radicalised group uprising (Khashan, 2017)

The administrative system, which includes education, health care and environment management, is unduly complex owing to over-centralization, nepotism, low accountability, undue formality and inviolable religious and cultural values. These issues are complicated by a rigid bureaucratic system, corruption, undue rules and regulations, poor implementation and monitoring capacity, and limited information to make decisions. Furthermore, lack of consultation and coordination of inter-agency, overlooking of regulations, an insufficient delegation of authority and delays in decision-making affected the administrative functioning of the state and thereby limited its performing capacity (Jonathan K. Hanson, 2013).

Another inherent challenge in the intransigent political ecosystem of Saudi is the sporadic disillusionment between the rulers and religious elites or clerics. In many instances of policy implementation to push boundaries, religious clerics seem to come on the way. They can voice and influence social and cultural norms, including education, healthcare and environment management. Religious clerics have opposed and stalled many reform projects, including driving rights to women, physical exercise for women, unofficial gyms, spas and more (Kinninmont, 2017)

On the cultural front, Saudis are generally not law-abiding citizens and often violate the law with impunity. (Note 6) The Saudi's social behaviour of abusing expatriates or immigrant workers seems to be their norm rather than a serious behavioural problem or total disrespect of the law; they often treat them as an entity that requires no dignity (Peebles, 2013) (Pipes, 2005). A citizenry with humanistic values is a key impetus for sustainable economic growth, and such cultural revival among Saudis could prove to be essential for achieving the success of "Vision 2030."

8. Conclusion

With a social and economic vision so high and the challenges so impeding, the "Vision 2030" could also land into the abyssal of an unsound project and phantasmagoria, as reiterated by Khashan because the reformation of social and economic values of any theocratic government with Islamic values is 'no mean feat' (Khashan, 2017). Such mega dispensation is conceivable only when there is a political will and the people's adamant and persisting general will. Albeit some of the indicators of the education, health and environment sectors are faring towards the international averages, many challenges obstruct the success of the mega-project. They range from cultural control of religious elites or clerics in education and social norms to the despotic deliverance of the rulers without consulting the concerned stakeholders.

In the education sector, the kingdom predominantly follows the primitive rote learning method with less emphasis on up-scaling teachers' skills and training, acknowledging teachers' voice and consent in decision-making and critical thinking approach, as some scholars reiterated. Interestingly, though higher education in Saudi is at a precocity, research and teaching are not in synchrony. Further, the lack of attractive fellowships for those pursuing research and the poor condition of R&D institutes and universities resulted in the absence of a conducive environment for rational and scientific thinking, a prerequisite for achieving "Vision 2030" goals.

Concerning the healthcare system, the kingdom is still poised with inadequately skilled health professionals, low medical literacy and poor health infrastructure and services; the sector is further stressed due to increasing demands

and stagnant resources. The drought crisis or water scarcity has been a serious issue in the state. Hence, along with the existing water withdrawal method from groundwater, desalination method, water recycling and reuse, additional measures are required to be adopted in the water management system of the Saudi government. Here, the water situation is worsened by the absence of formal water regulations.

This paper claims that a new social contract is needed in the Saudi government, not only to replace the old social contract if not for reformation but mainly to focus on how to overcome the serious challenges that the country confronts that are reflected in "Vision 2030". The old social contract of the overwhelmingly authoritarian state, working with crony capitalism, needs to be replaced with a new social contract. In this, the relationship between the state and citizens is based on liberal democratic values where the state intervention is fair and just, accountable and impartial and conducive for more participation of the citizens in the policy-making.

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Notes

Note 1. The learning method is known to be propounded by Marton and Saljo (1976). As per their findings, there are two learning techniques: rote learning and deep learning. Rote learning means memorization of information without understanding the subject. In contrast, the deep learning technique is the practice of reading between the lines, a technique that necessitates the meaning of the subject.

Note 2. The United Nations SDG3 aims to ascertain good health and well-being to all, including an effort to end the pandemic of AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis and other communicable diseases by 2030. The goal also aims to achieve universal health coverage (UHC); provide access to safe and subsidized medicines and vaccines to all. Endorsing and funding R&D for vaccine development has been essential to expanding access to affordable medicines and vaccines. For more details, see https://unric.org/en/sdg-3/ accessed on 13 October 2022.

Note 3. For detail, see https://medicine.ksu.edu.sa/en/node/2667 accessed on 16 October 2022.

Note 4. In 1960, 60 per cent of the water consumption was supplied by surface water and other renewable sources (rainwater, dams, shallow aquifer, etc.). Water consumption increased by 75 per cent in 2010 while the supply of renewable water sources remains unchanged. In the same year, 34 per cent of water consumption was supplied by renewable sources, and the consumption of groundwater sources increased from 38 per cent to 59 per cent to meet the increasing demand. However, with the advances in desalination technology, around 60 per cent of the water supply comes from desalination, less than 40 per cent from groundwater, and the remaining from recycling and reuse. For detail, see https://ussaudi.org/water-in-saudi-arabia-desalination-wastewater-and-privatization/ accessed on 14 October 2022.

Note 5. At present, more than 40 per cent of the world's population is affected by water-related issues, and it is expected to rise as the temperature increases. The number of countries experiencing water crises and desertification incidents is increasing, thereby exacerbating the water supplies and sanitation services. By 2050, it is estimated that at least one in every four persons will experience a water shortage. The goal of ensuring universal safe and affordable drinking water to all by 2030 would require massive financing for infrastructure, sanitation facilities, hygiene and restoring water-associated ecosystems. For more detail, see https://www.jointsdgfund.org/sustainable-development-goals/goal-6-clean-water-and-sanitation accessed on 14 October 2022.

Note 6. There are many instances where Saudi employers violated the law and harmed the hired foreigners or

workers. For instance, four Indonesian women who were employed as domestic workers by a Saudi family were physically mistreated after they were found engaging in black magic on the family's son. Two women succumbed to injuries, and two got severely injured from the physical harassment. For detail, see https://www.hrw.org/news/2007/08/17/saudi-arabia-migrant-domestics-killed-employers accessed on 14 October 2022.

Note 7. The migrant workers make up about half of the total workforce (8 million) in Saudi Arabia; most of them are unskilled workers engaging in domestic work, and they are exposed to inadequate labour laws and susceptible to verbal and physical abuse by Saudi employers. For example, a Pilipino domestic worker, Lorraine, was physically assaulted many times, insulted and fed bread and leftover food for over nine months by the Saudi employers. For detail, see https://countercurrents.org/peebles081213.htm accessed on 14 October 2022.

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