



# Can the "House of Saud" be toppled by democratic revolution?

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With a day of rage planned on 11 March and a 3000 strong strike in February, are cracks starting to show in Saudi Arabia? By Dave Stockton

Before events in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain and Libya most ?experts? would say ?never? to this question. The most they would concede ? or, rather, fear - was that an Islamic fundamentalist uprising might topple the corrupt and pro-American ?House of Saud?. It is the most repressive country in the Middle East and maintains an absolute monarchy with no elected parliament or political parties. Women's rights are non-existent and they are not even allowed to drive cars.

Yet the events in the rest of the Arab world have put the wind up these autocrats. The 87-year-old King Abdullah has responded to the upheavals by announcing \$37 billion in handouts to Saudi citizens, including pay raises, unemployment benefits and increased housing provision.

Unprecedented, over 1000 ? mainly foreign ? construction workers have called for a general strike at the construction site of Saudi Binladin Group, which is one of the largest construction projects in the country. They are demanding food, money, decent accommodation ? and respect. These workers are superexploited, working 13 hours a day without overtime and paid a pittance. They are forced to live in squalor, with one toilet for every 10 people, and only have access to dirty drinking water. In a country where trade unions are illegal, workers have started to organise in a sister company, to start a new wave of strikes in different parts of the construction site.

In Saudi, too, the internet poses a challenge to the regime. Young Saudi bloggers have spread the news of the unrest in Tunis, Cairo and Benghazi, and are building a social media movement. Hundreds of people have backed a Facebook campaign calling for a ?day of rage? across Saudi Arabia on 11 March, to demand an elected ruler, greater freedom for women and the release of political prisoners.

The corruption of the country's rulers is legendary. The royal house must be the biggest ?extended family? in history, with some 6,000 princes, each receiving hundreds of thousands of dollars a month to spend in London, Paris or on the Riviera. They alone consume a third of the country's oil revenue. No wonder the US oil tycoons and private equity executives, such as ex-US vice president Dick Cheney of Halliburton or our own former PM John Major of the Carlyle Group, have lucrative links to the Saudi royals and fawn over them.

Although the country holds 25 per cent of the world's known oil reserve, and keep the price down for their US and European masters by opening the taps if the price goes too high, the Saudis played an even important role as US regional gendarme and banker. They lavishly funded the Mujahedeen fighting the Red Army in Afghanistan in the 1980s and have bankrolled two Gulf Wars for the US.

Both the US and UK were crucial in the foundation of the state in the 1920s and 1930s and continue to arm its huge armed forces. The Saudi military, besides the army, air force and navy, also includes the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) and paramilitary forces, totalling 75,000 active soldiers and 25,000 tribal levies. All in all there are some 200,000 active-duty personnel. In addition, there is a military intelligence service.

The SANG is effectively King Abdullah's private army, independent of the Defence Ministry, a counterbalance to the royal faction under Crown Prince Sultan. Indeed the House of Saud is faction-ridden and in a recent BBC Arabia interview, Prince Talal Bin Abdul Alaziz, the king's half-brother, warned of the coming storm if reforms aren't made immediately. He advocated a constitutional monarchy similar to Kuwait and Jordan.

But despite the faux feudal structure and orientalist fancy dress of the monarchy (in fact, it is very much a British creation and their own rulers had experience of a century and a half of such historical falsification at home to guide them), Saudi Arabia is what Marxists term a 'rentier capitalist state', one which relies on selling the rights to extract a natural resource, plus the vast financial wealth it has accumulated and invested in the imperialist heartlands and elsewhere.

Like Libya and the smaller petro-monarchies, the country's income from its gold reserves has enabled its rulers to maintain a highly unusual social structure. The population is estimated to be between 24-27 million, but some 31 per cent of the population is made up of foreign nationals, constituting the bulk of the Saudi working class. Over a million of these are Indians, 900,000 are Pakistanis and the same number of Egyptians, and about 500,000 apiece come from the Philippines and Indonesia.

Yet in spite of its vast oil wealth, official unemployment stood at 10.7 per cent in 2010. In fact it is much higher. About two-thirds of the population is under 29 and the unemployment rate is believed to be around 40 per cent. Inflation has rocketed recently, so there are causes for discontent.

A rebellion in Saudi Arabia, let alone a revolution, will not be easy. It will not be bloodless. Indeed, as events in Libya show, these types of state where the rulers have prevented the growth of a native working class and have built up a well-paid high-tech apparatus of repression will hold on to the bitter end. Nor will the western imperialists and Israel look with a friendly eye to the destabilisation of their top remaining asset in the Middle East.

But in the context of a tidal wave of democracy, headed by the youth, sweeping the entire region it can happen. 2011 is one of those years in which 'everything is possible'.

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