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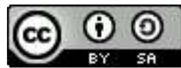

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Building the Body Politic

Emerging Corporatism in Saudi Arabia

Steffen Hertog

1 Saudi Arabia has been developing a very specific type of corporatism. In its channelling and controlling of debates, the Saudi regime is reacting to a number of internal and external crises, attempting to organize an increasingly complex society. Overall, however, the exercise has so far proved remarkably sterile, not only due to its top-down nature, but also due to the low degree of formal organization of Saudi political interests on the societal side. Among all modern sectors of society, only business appears to be a serious negotiation partner for the regime. This points to how different trajectories of political development shape and limit corporatist options for authoritarian regimes: the Al Saud have very little formal structures to co-opt and find it hard to impose new formal structures onto a society mostly organized along informal lines.

2 IN THE LAST THREE YEARS, Saudi watchers have been torn between arguing that either a lot or nothing at all has changed about Saudi politics. In a sense, both is true: On the one hand, not only has the language of permitted political contestation changed, but a number of political institutions have been reshaped quite substantially or even created from scratch, with certain negotiations taking place in a format that would have been unthinkable only a few years ago.

3 The *Majlis Al-Shûrâ* has substantially expanded its legislative gamut, the private sector plays an increasing role in policy deliberation, National Dialogues have been called in to debate the societal and political problems of the kingdom, and a number of political interest groups have been formed. On the other hand, although new mechanisms of political contestation have emerged, this has not fundamentally changed the power structures or the strong top-down nature of most public politics in the kingdom.

4 What does this amount to? This paper will argue that the regime has essentially embarked upon the modernization of Saudi authoritarianism by attempting to institutionalize important aspects of the political debate. The way this is being done, I propose, is best captured with the time-honoured concept of corporatism. Corporatist categories are not only highly relevant for analyzing recent Saudi developments, but their use also makes for interesting comparisons with other authoritarian regimes. It

helps to bring the kingdom back into the framework of comparative politics, testing and giving new nuances to familiar concepts.

5 Saudi Arabia has been developing a very specific type of corporatism. In its channelling and controlling of debates, the Saudi regime is reacting to a number of internal and external crises, attempting to organize an increasingly complex society. Overall, however, the exercise has so far proved remarkably sterile, not only due to its top-down nature, but also due to the low degree of formal organization of Saudi political interests on the societal side. Among all modern sectors of society, only business appears to be a serious negotiation partner for the regime. This points to how different trajectories of political development shape and limit corporatist options for authoritarian regimes: the *Âl 'Saûd* have very little formal structures to co-opt and find it hard to impose new formal structures onto a society mostly organized along informal lines.

Definition of terms: corporatism

6 Two dimensions of corporatism are frequently distinguished: corporatism as organizational pattern and corporatism as a type of decision-making[1]. For the different Saudi institutions we will look at, the first is often, but not always, more relevant. There have been many disputes over definitions and breadth of the concept, but most authors feel obliged to cite Philippe Schmitter's seminal 1974 definition, which is an organizational one:

7 "Corporatism can be defined as a system of interest representation in which the constituent units are organized into a limited number of singular, compulsory, non-competitive, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories, recognized or licensed (if not created) by the state and granted a deliberate representational monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and supports."[2]

8 In most studies, corporatism is used to describe the relationship of state, labour and employers, but there is no obvious reason to limit it to these groups. Schmitter further breaks down the concept into "state corporatism" and "societal corporatism". The latter is the more "democratic" version which has grown out of a relatively open contention of societal interests. The former is state-imposed and, as we will see, much more relevant for the Saudi case. Collier and Collier, concerned about conceptual stretching which might make corporatism a vacuous "one size fits all" model, offer further dimensions of differentiation: State structuring (how much does the state add specific institutions in their representational monopoly through licensing, compulsory membership etc.), subsidy (how does the state pay for an institution or help it to finance itself), and constraints (how does the state control selection of leaders, the scope of collective action, group policies etc.). They contend that the first two categories are "inducements", and that they are balanced against the constraints to different degrees according to the type of political regime. This is another way to differentiate more or less authoritarian corporatisms[3].

9 All these are mostly organizational variables. When it comes to decision-making, suffice it to say that corporatism usually is characterized by exclusive access, consultation with corporatist institutions prior to law-making, regular interaction in functionally specialized domains, emphasis on consensus, and potentially the delegation of specific policy tasks to corporatist bodies[4].

10 Corporatism is not a one-dimensional concept which can be easily described along a "more or less" continuum, but rather a cluster of characteristics[5]. There are different subtypes, arrived at not only through specific variables being articulated differently, but also through the absence of specific characteristics: few political set-ups perfectly match Schmitter's definition, but many can still be usefully categorized as corporatist[6].

11 Why is the concept useful for the study of Saudi Arabia, a country which in many areas of politics conspicuously lacks a history of formal interest group representation? I argue that it is exactly the absence of such a tradition which explains the specific shape of the corporatism that, as the essay will demonstrate, has been emerging in Saudi Arabia in recent years. Corporatism offers the best framework to capture the top-down nature of politics in the kingdom, the limiting and orchestrating role of state actors, the exclusivity of politics, and the segmentation of group representation through state actors. On an ideational level, too, it corresponds to the consensual ideology of paternally controlled deliberation in Saudi Arabia ("*shûrâ*"). At the same time, the broader comparative framework which corporatism and its sub-categories offer highlights some crucial Saudi specifics caused by the rentier nature and specific institutional history of the Saudi polity. This is hence an attempt to bring Saudi Arabia back into the remit of comparative politics, something that most commentators on the country seem to be uninterested in[7].

12 Looking at specifically "modern", openly institutionalized articulations of corporatism , it should be noted that Khaldun Naqib has developed a broader concept of Gulf corporatism, used by Nazih Ayubi for the Saudi case[8]. In Naqib 's model, ruling families exert quasi-traditional control over large, segmented societal "corporations", including the clergy, the merchant class, tribes, the state-created new middle class, and expatriate workers[9]. This original approach is useful for broader structural analysis of the Golf Cooperation Council (GCC) societies, but less useful for the analysis of specific political processes and organizational changes. As he looks at macro-structures, questions of institutionalization – whether formal or informal – are not pursued: are there for example collective negotiations of some kind with the new middle class?[10] What are the channels of interest articulation?

13 Similarly, this paper does not seek to uncover deep historical traditions along the lines of the "Islamic state" or other culturalist models. There may be interesting continuities of segmentary and paternal rule, but these cannot be discussed here. More to the point, a lot of the institutional features in the modern Saudi corporatism are *sui generis:* they are emerging in the specific historical context of a large, bureaucratized rentier state moving towards partial modernization of its rule over an increasingly complex society.

The record: corporatism in recent years

14 It will become apparent that a lot of the recent political-institutional reform in Saudi Arabia broadly fits Schmitter's corporatist formula. However, while there has been a remarkable degree of institutionalization in politically important sectors, the actual record of both meaningful corporatist negotiations and corporatist grasp over wider functional segments of society is very patchy and uneven, a phenomenon that the subsequent section will try to explain.

15 The Saudi Journalists Association (SJQA) is one of these new institutions. Saudi Arabia has 13 newspapers, and many non-religious political activists have a journalistic background. The foundation of some kind of association had been debated in Saudi Arabia for several years. The official go-ahead was given in 2002, in a climate of broader debate and reform

which followed 9/11, and that was subsequently deepened after the May 2003 Riyadh bomb attacks[11].

16 In early 2004, the Saudi Journalists Association seemed to take definite shape, and a vote for the board was scheduled. 530 full-time journalists were to vote for 9 members among 24 candidateswho had put their names forward to the constituent committee and, as far as we can tell, been vetted behind the scenes by the Ministry of Information. Local editors announced that the association was to regulate the media profession, acquire functions of a union and contribute to the defence of journalists' rights and freedom of expression in the kingdom. It was advertised as a token of political modernization.

17 Turkî Al-Sudayrî, editor-in-chief of *al-Riyâḍ* and chairman of the constituent committee, claimed that the Ministry of Culture and Information would not interfere in the association's activities. The ministry had, however, previously approved the candidate list, and one of the candidates was a ministry advisor. An eight-member panel including officials from the ministry and the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce and Industry was to oversee the election.

18 The formation of the society was accompanied by criticism of the "too little too late" kind in the more liberal papers, attacking among other things, the official designation of "association" which avoided stronger categories as "society" or "union". When the elections approached, criticism was voiced about the preponderance of editors-in-chief among candidates (a technique of control also used in Egypt during WWII[12]). Dâwud al-Shiryân, a Saudi writer and others announced abstention from the poll. Female journalist 'Abîr Mishqas refused to vote as there were no female candidates.

19 Eventually the general assembly was not convened. Seven candidates withdrew among criticism of editor-in-chief over-representation, and there was criticism that none of them had a coherent program and that the whole process was disorganized and suffered from lack of information for participants. Ongoing disputes were only resolved by the ministry's eventual decision in April that it would appoint four board members whereas eight would be elected, after many of the nominees had opted out, citing " time constraints". The official "press organizations regulation", setting out conditions of membership and organization in detail, was amended accordingly.

20 When the election took place in early June, it was decided after all that the board should have 9 members, all of which were to be elected, making the SJA the first Saudi association with a fully elected board. 300 journalists participated in the vote, two female members were elected to the board, and Turkî Al-Sudayrî became chairman.

21 The association appears to have performed few of the more political functions it lays claim to and was hardly featured in the media. The one thing it publicly condemned was hostage-taking in Iraq, an issue safely outside Saudi boundaries. When a female writer at *al-Madîna* newspaper was suspended as a consequence of a muckraking story criticising a big Saudi business, the association took no action on her behalf, with one of its representatives stating that there are official bodies for labour disputes, and that the association could at best consult her in the latter.

22 Even if there initially was a bottom-up dimension of self-organization among journalists, state agencies seem to have stepped in increasingly to mould the shape and set the boundaries of the new institution. Corresponding to Schmitter's description of segmentary technocratic negotiation and control, the association has been controlled by the Ministry of Culture and Information.

23 Interestingly, the association was formed after a limited media clampdown had happened in mid-2003, when the brief “Riyadh spring” after the May 12 bomb attacks had led to increasingly open criticism of the Saudi system, especially of the official Wahhâbî orthodoxy. This may indicate that the intention behind the association’s licensing is the modernization of control over a sensitive functional sector. Through the formation of the association the regime has driven a wedge into the journalists’ community. It does not represent interests of Saudi journalists as a whole, but it has attracted a substantial number of moderate players preventing, if nothing else, the formation of any alternative organization.

24 The other two professional associations that have been formed in recent years exhibit a similar pattern of state control and lacklustre public performance. After several years of discussion, the Ministry of Justice gave the go-ahead for a Saudi association of lawyers within the chambers of commerce in summer 2003. However, rather little has been heard of the institution since its formation, and it has been criticized for inactivity and its failure to communicate sufficiently with its members. The civil engineering society, established in Jeddah in 2000, also appears to be strongly state-dependent.

25 With journalism, the legal profession and engineering, the Saudi regime has officially organized three important functional strata which have been actively involved in the politics of many other larger Middle East and North African (MENA) countries[13]. What is remarkable is the rather calm and unspectacular way in which this has happened. Despite the monopoly character of the new organizations, their creation has not caused great resistance. Conversely, they do not seem to exert tight control over their members or their professions as a whole or play the salient role in policy-making that corporatist bodies do in other systems.

26 Professional organizations are rather typical candidates for corporatist arrangements, and the emerging Saudi set-up, doubts over substance notwithstanding, closely fits the classical corporatist paradigm. It may not be immediately clear why the National Dialogue, consisting of a series of grandiosely announced conferences over societal problems in the kingdom, should also be a corporatist venture. Looking at each of the individual conferences, however, one sees that representatives of specific functional segments society had been handpicked by the state under the Crown Prince’s tutelage, and a quite specific pre-defined range of problems was to be discussed each time. In the absence of other forums for dialogue, the National Dialogue acquired a kind of officially sanctioned monopoly on state-society debate on a variety of big issues. Add to it semi-institutio-nalization through repetition of the exercise and the creation of the National Dialogue Center, and the venture looks quite corporatist.

27 The first session in summer 2003 included 50 clerics and intellectuals and probably had the broadest remit, perhaps as it also had the function of a trial round. It *inter alia* discussed issues of extremism, social order and morals, of freedom of expression and the repercussions of all of this on national unity. In their final statements, the participants called for the recognition of doctrinal diversity among Muslims – a first-ever in the modern Wahhâbî kingdom – and for more participation in government. Former dissidents participated in the event, which made it an attempt to bring figures into the grasp of the state[14]. Proceedings and final documents were kept secret, however.

28 The next session took place in December 2003, with 60 “intellectuals” participating, including 10 women. It was mainly concerned with issues of extremism. In the spirit of

the age, the participants called for greater institutionalization of politics – although based on less of a top-down vision than the regime so far has allowed, with national elections and independent interest groups. The recommendations were not published.

29 The third session – on women – took place in June 2004, with half of the 70 participants being female. The four broad topics were women's rights and duties, women and work, women and education and women and society. In the official view, it appears, women had quite a distinct functional role in society, and under Saudi conditions of strict segregation and legal discrimination, women are arguably more of a distinct corporatist entity than in other societies. This time there was more public reporting of discussions, and also increased criticism of participants over conduct and substance of the debate. All discussions were run by males, and conservatives from the religious establishment were over-represented. For liberal participants, the event appeared somewhat stage-managed, and sensitive issues as women's driving or legal status questions were not even touched upon. Some participants tried to walk out. Little input, one participant thought, came from "society itself", and the event was to a considerable degree held for external and media consumption[15].

30 Despite doubts over the format and conduct of the National Dialogue, the exercise was repeated a fourth time in December 2004. The youth session of the National Dialogue may have been the most thoroughly prepared one. Pre-meetings with young Saudis were held in various communities and youth issues debated in the press. Again, a case can be made for youth occupying a very special segment in the highly patriarchal Saudi society, although their functional role is not as clear.

31 This time probably more than ever before, doubts were raised about the representative character of the exercise. The selection of invitees was criticized as random, and there was general scepticism about reform prospects among Saudi youth. Even some of the participants were highly skeptical about the outcome of the National Dialogue process.

32 By the time of the fourth dialogue, the whole undertaking had been criticized quite openly in the media as being secretive and sterile[16]. More benevolent critics at least asked for the process to be opened up to the public (which has not yet happened). After all, an official aim of the process was "to involve citizens in the decision-making process".

33 Conceptually, the National Dialogue appears like an attempt at "instant corporatism" of different segments of Saudi society. They are not quite "functional" groups in a narrow technocratic sense, but are seen to occupy different, distinct roles in society. The National Dialogue process put them in different, distinct categories, selected what were perceived as representatives, and licensed limited debates in a pre-determined organizational framework. Schmitter speaks of the "deliberate narrowing and encapsulation of 'relevant publics'" through corporatism[17]. Never was the whole Saudi society supposed to be represented.

34 A similar narrowing and encapsulation seems to have been the motivation behind creating the National Human Rights Association (NHRA) in early 2004. Although a human rights interest group is not representing a specific functional segment of society (beyond human rights advocates and perhaps specific excluded groups), it performs a specific, limited supervisory function and, in the Saudi case, has been set up in classical "state corporatist" fashion.

35 The setting up of two human rights bodies, one private and one governmental, had been announced by the government already after Amnesty International had conducted its

vigorous Saudi Arabia campaign in 2000. In the run-up to the official formation of the private body, criticism was voiced over its set-up, with a government figure at its head and with its whole membership selected by the government. Nonetheless, the NHRA was founded in March 2004, with 41 male and female members and with Dr. ‘Abd Allâh ibn S âlih al-‘Ubayd, former secretary-general of the Muslim World League, member of the *Majlis al-Shûrâ* and the new Minister of Education, as chairman. Dr. Bandar al-Hajar, a professor of economics and also *Majlis* member, was selected as vice chairman.

36 Although many of the 41 NHRA members have a reputation of integrity, they had all in effect been appointed by the king. The organization’s charter prohibited the publication of its reports. Apparently King Fahd has made a donation of 100 million Saudi Riyal to the NHRA.

37 The body has avoided openly touching upon political issues. When a dozen of reformers were locked up shortly after the NHRA formation, the first thing al-‘Ubayd clarified was that arrests are an internal issue of the kingdom, and that the government has the right to arrest people. Interestingly, the dissidents apparently had planned the formation of an independent human rights organization.

38 All the cases of corporatism and (quasi-)corporatism discussed so far were attempts to fill a previously unstructured political space. Co-optation and employment of moderate actors was one of the motivations and has worked to a certain extent[18]. The regime had ample financial and personnel resources to shape the new institutions. Moreover, there appears to be a pool of rather docile functionaries with government or clerical background, often of advanced age, who are made heads of “civil society” organizations or events. Some of them are from the *Majlis al-Shûrâ*, which is a ready source of intellectual manpower affiliated with the government.

39 There is however one cluster of corporatist bodies which long pre-existed the institutional reform initiatives since the early 1990s: the Chambers of Commerce and Industry, some of which have been in existence for more than half a century[19]. Like chambers in many other countries, they have been basically organized by the state, with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry appointing one third of the board members. Membership in chambers is obligatory for all businesses. Most of what follows is based on interviews and discussions with Saudi businessmen, bureaucrats and chamber representatives in Riyadh between April 2003 and July 2004. For decades, the chambers have been powerful veto players on economic policy. Much of the influence they have wielded, however, was exerted through informal channels, i.e. personal contacts of leading business figures to princes and ministers. It is only recently that the chambers have been included into economic policy-making in a more regularized fashion and that their policy input extends beyond vetoes against specific measures (as e.g. austerity programs in the 1980s). Most drafts of economic legislation nowadays are officially circulated to the chambers and debated in its committees.

40 Consultation before legislation is typical feature of corporatist policy-making[20]. The inclusion of the chambers is part of a generally much more formalized way of law-making in which drafts are circulated among the cabinet, the Supreme Economic Council (SEC) and the *Majlis al-Shûrâ*. The chambers and the private sector in general have several access points for consultation in this system: The Supreme Economic Council, essentially a mini-cabinet for economic policy under the Crown Prince’s leadership, has an advisory body which includes private sector actors and regularly invites business representatives for hearings[21]. The *Majlis*, in addition to having a few business members, also conducts

hearings in its specialized committees. In the 1980s, by contrast, laws were often “made up by a bureaucrat and a consultant in the backdoor of a ministry”[22].

41 Although the government has the last word on legislation and can choose which policy input to accept and which not, the business representation granted in these compartmentalized institutions exceeds that of any other societal interest group. One might object that the clergy is even more powerful, as they play a very prominent role, for example on matters of education and justice. More than the private sector, however, they are part of the state apparatus, and their influence has rather been curtailed in recent years. Some of the more independent popular preachers are powerful in society, but have less direct (and no institutionalized) access to decision-making.

42 A number of further initiatives which have not yet resulted in fully operational institutions have been taken in recent years and indicate a trend of further corporatization attempts. The flurry of initiatives shows how concerned the regime has been recently about creating “civil society” and “interest groups” or semblances thereof. Plans includes a “Saudi Publisher’s Society” (licensed by the Ministry of Information), as well as teachers’, doctors’ and children’s societies.

43 The most interesting development from a comparative perspective may be the timid attempts to organize labour in the kingdom. Unions have been outlawed in Saudi Arabia since the 1950s, but in May 2001, the Council of Ministers sanctioned the formation of labour committees on an enterprise level for companies with more than 100 employees. So far only Saudi Aramco, British Aerospace and a number of large public companies have formed one. Most of the new initiatives appear similarly top-down and lifeless as the ones discussed in more details.

44 It may make sense for the reader to have a second look at Schmitter’s definition of corporatism cited above. Admittedly, National Dialogue, *Majlis al-Shûrâ* and Human Rights Association only exhibit certain corporatist elements, but even then a corporatist vision of politics seems to underlie their deployment in the political field, especially if one compares them with “functional equivalents” in less authoritarian societies (public debates and conferences, parliaments, the pluralism of human rights organizations etc.).

45 I have deliberately eschewed the discussion of cultural and ideological models of corporatism. Suffice it to say that the persistent rhetoric of national unity and the implicit assumption that public good can be orchestrated by the regime can be considered typically corporatist. “Corporatists, basing their faith either on the superior wisdom of an authoritarian leader or the enlightened foresight of technocratic planners, believe that... public unity can be found and kept”[23]. Harmony between classes and overarching national community as alternatives to Western liberalism are recurring ideas in authoritarian corporatist thought which are current in various ways in the kingdom[24].

46 Formally, Saudi Arabia seems to be converging on other Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes. The very strong top-down nature of Saudi corporatism is striking even by Middle Eastern standards, however. The regime is not even co-opting existing initiatives and groups, but rather trying to create them from scratch.

Causes: recent crises, negotiation and societal complexity

47 Although the immediate causes of formalization are not the main focus of this essay, a few comments should be made. Somewhat more will be said on what I think are the broader structural reasons for formally organizing political interests in the kingdom.

48 Much less would probably have come off the Crown Prince's modest liberal inclinations, were it not for the political and diplomatic crisis following 9/11. At least the marked acceleration of Prince 'Abd Allâh's reform drive was a result of increased international attention and the domestic debate over the ideological foundation of Âl 'Saûd rule which followed 9/11 and, a fortiori, the May 2003 bombs in Riyadh.

49 The intention to cater to an international audience has probably played a role for the formation of NHRA and journalists' association, and for the embryonic attempt of labour organization. They all followed specific phases of international criticism and, although regime representatives were careful to stress the domestic nature of decisions, international norms were regularly referred to – not traditionally a prominent feature of Saudi politics. At the same time, all initiatives above also reacted to – unorganized – domestic debates, although to various degrees.

50 In one way or another, all of the corporatist strategies are meant to incorporate, placate and shape specific groups in an unruly time. Both because other groups are relatively underdeveloped and because the domestic crisis was an ideological one, Saudi "intellectuals" have taken special pride of place. Through the National Dialogue, and to varying degrees the journalists' association, the *Majlis al-Shûrâ* and the NHRA, the regime provides a variety of political roles for intellectuals willing to play along. Saudi intellectual corporatism can involve substantial funds and employment opportunities, although the political economy of such patronage is yet to be researched.

51 As societal debate stirred in the kingdom, the regime attempted to channel it into newly organized political space, filled and shaped according to rules mostly laid out by the state. In some cases, the creation of new institutions seemed to aim at pre-empting groups from emerging without state control, while at the same time claiming modernizing credentials for the regime.

52 More broadly one may argue that Saudi Arabian society has reached such a level of complexity that, especially in times of crisis, it cannot be controlled exclusively through the old combination of informal patronage and bureaucracy anymore[25]. More articulate functional groups like journalists and lawyers need to be formally organized in order to be incorporated into the system, and (controlled) fora for public debate and, in some cases, serious policy consultation need to be provided. "Consultation" and "debate" are the new watchwords.

53 The Saudi state, though still basically distributional, has more complex and demanding tasks than 20 years ago: education has to be adapted to modern needs, labour markets reformed, and unprecedented numbers of Saudi youth and highly educated women given a perspective and functions in a changing society. Local media need to be given a role in a context of transnational information exchange, and demands for political liberalization from various intellectual elites accommodated. Most of these issues are hard to resolve by royal fiat. With increasing social complexity on the one hand and limited resources on the other, it is becoming harder to calm whole social strata merely through employment or subsidies.

54 Apart from the other functions alluded to, the new corporatist institutions are quite probably also designed as means of information-gathering in a slowly evolving society: be it that the professional associations are to gauge sentiments among their members, be it that the National Dialogue – however dysfunctional – is meant to reveal intellectual and

social trends, or even that the NHRA is to check certain aspects of police behaviour (who else could do it, after all?).

55 The increased inclusion of the Chambers of Commerce into economic policy-making is the most clear-cut example for regularized information-gathering through state agencies. The complexity of policy demands from business has increased significantly since the oil boom. Saudi businesses and markets are more complex today, and interest in details of economic regulation – intellectual property, product standards, capital market and foreign investment rules, insurance and labour regulations etc. – has increased accordingly. Industry and services have been growing, retail and wholesale markets have grown complex and competitive, and state contractors, though still important, nowadays do far more than just skimming of commissions.

56 The Saudi system, though still distributional at its roots, has developed far beyond the direct mere dishing out of oil money. The more open and complex pattern of economic policy-making seems to be a reaction to this, an attempt to make the system "ready for economic policy", digesting more complex information and sectoral demands. In the past, Saudi regulations in economic and other areas have often turned out to be impossible to implement. This was due to administrative weakness, but also because a strong opposition of business elites and Chambers of Commerce[26]. On the state side, the economic and employment crisis amplifies the regime's need to find a new partnership with Saudi business.

Problems

57 The performance record of different corporatist institutions has been highly uneven, however. The reasons for this can teach us a lot about the shape of Saudi state-society relations in general. It should be clear by now that one of the main problems of the new institutions is their lack of outreach: they do not seem to organize and communicate with their respective segments of society in an effective way and their reresentational claim appears questionable. On top of that, it is not clear if the state consults them as systematically as their role as monopolist interest group should imply.

58 Despite all claims to the contrary, the new institutions have not only been licensed, but mostly created by the state, and their range of action is defined by the regime. They tend to mirror government structures and rhetoric. Their leaders are in danger of relying more on the government than on those they claim to represent. It is a general danger that the leadership of corporatist institutions can become dependent on the state through positive inducements like government recognition, granting of monopoly status, subsidies etc[27]. With the new array of state-created bodies, the phenomenon is carried to its extreme in the kingdom[28].

59 Saudi Arabia has long been a "parental state", with the regime trying to shape and guide society. One problem for the new institutions certainly is that the government is loath to give up any control and yield sufficient autonomy to the new bodies. Conversely, however, the new bodies are faced with a society (or societal segments) whose level of political mobilization and formal structuration is very low. This is crucial to understand the functional limits of the new corporatism.

60 Non-religious, "functional" political interests have hardly ever been formally organized in modern Saudi history, and there hence is little experience in society at large with formal political bodies or processes. Despite strong tensions within society, interests are

seldom politically articulated in any organized way. The initiatives outlined above usually are discussed only in limited, highly educated circles.

61 Even among the modern functional sectors – which, as far as liberal views are dominant, are rather isolated in society – there is little organizational tradition. The Saudi attempt to centrally control politics appears in parts at least to be undermined by a lack of societal infrastructure. Even if the new institutions were allowed to voice interests more forcefully, it would – at the current stage of institutional development – not be clear whose interests these are.

62 One reason for this “infrastructural deficit” of Saudi corporatism is of course that independent organization has traditionally been repressed. In addition, however, there has historically been less pressure for organized politics and, in recent decades, arguably less political conflict between the state and broader groups than in other MENA states. There probably are fewer political prisoners than in most other MENA states, demonstrations are rare and small, oppositionist attempts to create parties have been very small-scale and ramshackle.

63 The only societal actors capable of mobilizing considerable sections of society appear to be popular dissident preachers, which are beyond the scope of this paper and tap social networks which are not accessible to the state-created or co-opted interest groups discussed here. They might one day venture into formal associational politics – as Islamists have done in other MENA countries – but as yet exist in a parallel realm[29].

64 The reasons for the fragmentation of the Saudi society seem to mostly lie in the history of Saudi state formation. To put it briefly, the kingdom never went through a phase of populist activation of society as other MENA states, but has always been ruled by an elite which put a premium on political quiescence. Carefully managed rentierism has played a very important part in immobilizing society, as it contributed to the creation of clientele groups in society and tended to induce a general dependency on state services. More specifically, it has led to increased fragmentation of society along formal and informal structures of patronage[30]. The regime has consistently discouraged the formation of independent groups and has favoured individual petitioning.

65 Vertical, personal links, often tied up with kinship structures, guarantee access to the modern Saudi system, to employment, education, public services, and protection from discrimination and maltreatment by the state. Interests are seldom channelled through formal institutions and usually pursued on an individual or at most local scale. Access to the resources of the system does not happen in an aggregate fashion, but through numerous parallel channels. Patronage structures are important even for functional elites[31].

66 Most inchoate civic structures which existed in pre-oil era cities were smashed or emasculated by the emerging central state, buffeted by unprecedented oil income. No labour or peasant classes – popular playgrounds for “political entrepreneurs” in modernizing countries – have emerged in the kingdom.

67 The lack of an associational tradition means a lack of organizations to co-opt. The clientelist structure of Saudi society, otherwise a stabilizing force, might now be offering passive resistance to attempts at formal organization – or tight institutional control[32]. Saudi society is complex, but at the same time fragmented.

68 The one exception, as has been indicated, is the upper stratum of the Saudi private sector. This buttresses the historical argument: Saudi business is relatively fragmented too, but

had much more freedom and space for development than most other segments of society. Its inclusion into policy-making appears much less artificial than all other attempts to formalize the Saudi political debate.

69 Now that the regime needs the private sector for employment and growth generation, it actually has a negotiation partner. The balance of needs and capacities on both sides seems more equal than for other groups. Although the government still has the last say on all economic laws, Saudi business is listened to more seriously than any other group.

70 Saudi corporatism hence is "segmental" in O'Donnell's sense, as the regime differentiates its approach and its incentives towards different groups[33]. Business corporatism also seems to contribute to the depoliticization of the Saudi bourgeoisie, as it is granted specific access through specific institutions in clearly delimited policy areas, which is of course a typical corporatist strategy. Saudi business tends to – carefully – voice political opinion only on business-related issues of corruption and inefficiency.

Attempts to build communication / mobilization infrastructure

71 Parts of the leadership may have realized how infrastructural deficits limit broader political communication with society in either direction. A number of – still desultory – regime attempts at grassroots organization and mobilization of Saudi society appear to be in the making. The unicipal elections in early 2005 were a careful experiment to increase popular identification with government and acquaint Saudis with limited channels of formal interest articulation of some kind. Moreover, new mechanisms are reportedly under development to enable citizens' communication with regional councils. A neighbourhood councils initiative has been conducted in Mecca region under the patronage of governor Prince 'Abd al-Majîd.

72 Following the corporatist ventures described above, various ministries reportedly have begun studying the establishment of further associations for broader interest groups like teachers or doctors with elected officials "to encourage popular participation in society". Moreover, supposedly as a reaction to the second sessin of the National Dialogue, The Ministry of Higher Education has announced plans to have university rectors, heads of departments, college deans and leaders of (yet to be created) students unions elected. In typical Saudi gradualism, similar to the three-stage municipal elections, the project is to be tried first in three universities.

73 In the near future, however, not much is likely to come out of all these attempts of the "overdeveloped state" in Saudi Arabia to develop extensions into society, be it due to lack of implementation or due to their heavy-handed management through state agencies. The initiatives seem to indicate some awareness among the leadership that without formal channels of interest aggregation, control over society in times of crisis will be hard to establish. But it is not clear whether the regime will leave enough breathing space for associational life to develop.

74 As far as there have been attempts at autonomous organization in politically sensitive areas, they have been suppressed. Calls for allowing civil society – as in the January 2003 petition from a variety of Saudi intellectuals to the Crown Prince – have been effectively disregarded. Appeals for implementation of these or similar National Dialogue demands are ignored or angrily dismissed. The dozen of political activists locked up in March 2004 had in the preceding month asked for an implementation timetable for a variety of reforms, and were reportedly involved in the establishment of an autonomous human rights society. Independent political and organizational claims, it turned out, were not

accepted[34]. Security agencies have exerted pressure to call off even small-scale private meetings of independent activists.

Conclusion

75 This paper has analyzed a number of recent political-institutional developments in Saudi Arabia, arguing that they amount to the emergence of a specific Saudi brand of corporatism. Some of the developments were triggered by the 9/11 and May 12 crises, others are more clearly related to overall economic and social challenges. The common intervening variable, however, is a leadership which wants to carefully modernize its polity.

76 The Saudi phenomenon has clearly proven to be "state corporatism". To further capture its specificity, one may perhaps call it "rentier corporatism". While it commands great resources of patronage, a rentier state such as Saudi Arabia is not forced to develop the kinds of administrative instruments which "production states" need to tax their citizens and regulate life in society. Moreover, if rents enter a system at an early stage of political development under conditions of cohesive leadership, it also does not need to develop "modern" political instruments of interest aggregation and negotiation. At a later point of time, when the bureaucracy has reached its limits of growth and patronage networks have been established, this kind of heritage can limit the manoeuvrability of the state and its adaptability to new social challenges. Although it has the resources to create new formal institutions, these have an insular character and find it hard to put roots into an informally organized society.

77 Comparing within the Gulf, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) may be most similar to this kind of ideal-type rentier state, whereas Bahrain and Kuwait have stronger traditions of formally organized interest politics (predating oil in the Kuwaiti case and being related to low rents, earlier political development, and stronger social cleavages and labour mobilization in Bahrain).

78 The "rentier corporatism" idea may appear tautological and *post hoc*. But note that also according to the general criterion of rentier state theory, UAE, Qatar, Oman are the more typical rentiers, where the relationship of material patronage and political quiescence appears the most clear-cut. If rentier corporatism is tautological, then rentier state theory is. I would rather propose that there is an ideal type rentier state, with cases like Saudi Arabia being among the best approximations, whereas others, where oil entered the stage at a later point of development or played a less pervasive role, are further removed from the ideal type of patronage and political immobilization through their political histories. A historicized rentier state concept – sensitive to pre-oil institutional heritage, and issues of historical sequencing – appears highly useful to me.

79 In typically patriarchal rentier corporatism, "constraints" on corporatist entities – to return to the categories of Collier and Collier – appear to be strong, but so are inducements for docile actors through patronage. The state can call into being whole clusters of organization by fiat, unlikely to meet immediate organized resistance. The flipside of the coin, however, is a lack of structures for communication with and mobilization of society beyond the immediate institutional structures. A society can be complex without being highly mobilized or formally structured. Corporatism, one might say, can only reduce complexity if society is organizable along specific lines. Top-heavy rentier corporatism may be dysfunctional almost by definition.

80 I do not want to paint a picture of Saudi society as totally atomized and passive. It is of course a highly structured society and individuals and smaller groups are very *adroit* at using informal structures to further their interests *vis-à-vis* the state. However, these structures – kinship, friendship, patron-client relations etc. – are not equivalent to formal structures of political interest mediation. Informal structures are not usually oriented to the public realm and to national political processes.

81 Latin American case studies have shown that informal structures of authority and communication can make formal-legal corporatism more flexible and actually buttress it [35]. In Mexico for example, clientelism coexists and limits corporatism, defusing its class structure[36]. For informal structures to become an important prop for corporatism, however, the corporatist bodies have to gather some political weight in the first place. In the kingdom, this seems to be the case only with the chambers of commerce, where formal and informal politics are intertwined and arguably tend to boost the institutions' influence.

82 A weakness of Saudi corporatism related to patronage structures on a bigger scale might be that the regime itself nowadays is much less coherent than a neatly orchestrated array of interest groups would demand. There seems to be little coordination between different corporatist initiatives, and the segmentation of administrative and patronage structures further contributes to the relative isolation of new bodies.

83 The low political mobilization of Saudi society means that formally organizing Saudi politics is a formidable challenge for the regime. It also indicates, however, that reform pressures are not yet an existential problem for the *Âl Sa'ûd*. "In the modernizing world, he controls the future who organizes its politics", Samuel Huntington wrote almost 40 years ago[37]. In our case, the conclusion must be that either Saudi Arabia is not really "modernizing", or the princes are not quite in control of its future. On balance, and for the time being, I would side with the former conclusion.

NOTES

1.Philippe SCHMITTER / Jürgen GROTE, *The Corporatist Sysiphsus: Past, Present and Future* (EUI Working Papers SPS n° 97/4), p. 4.

2.Philippe SCHMITTER, "Still the Century of Corporatism?", *Review of Politics*, Vol. 36, n° 1, January 1974, p. 93f.

3.Ruth Berins COLLIER / David COLLIER, "Inducements versus Constraints: Disaggregating "Corporatism"", *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 73, n° 4, December 1979, p. 968.

4.SCHMITTER / GROTE, p. 4.

5.Roland CZADA, "Konjunkturen des Korporatismus", in: Wolfgang STREECK, *Staat und Verbande*, PVS-Sonderheft 25 (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag 1995), p. 37-64.

6.COLLIER calls this “radial extension”of a concept; David COLLIER / James A. MAHON, “Conceptual 'Stretching’ Revisited: Adapting Categories in Comparative Analysis”, *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 87, n°. 3, December 1993, p. 845-855.
7.A more recent example of an eclectic attempt to explain Saudi politics is Daryl Champion, *The Paradoxical Kingdom. Saudi Arabia and the Momentum of Reform* (London 2003).
8.Nazih AYUBI, *Overstating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris 1995).
9.Khaldun NAQIB, *Society and State in the Gulf and Arab Peninsula: a Different Perspective* London; New-York: Routledge and the Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1990); analysis somewhat reminds of the historical array of status groups and estates in past autocratic corporatisms on the Iberian Peninsula and elsewhere (church, military, aristocracy etc.).
10. Moreover, tribes have been much overrated as coherent political actors in current Saudi Arabia.
11. This double attack on expatriate housing compounds was the first in a series conducted by the “Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula” and has uncomfortably exposed Saudi Arabia to international scrutiny. The main target of the attacks - conducted by young, radical jihadis - seems to have been to scare away Western residents.
12. Robert BIANCHI, *Unruly Corporatism: Associational Life in Twentieth-Century Egypt* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1989), p. 75.
13.A number of doctors' associations have been around in Saudi Arabia for a while, but never appear to have played any political role, one reason probably being the high share of expatriate in the medical profession.
14. Corporatist institutionalization has also been a historical means of bringing groups into official politics which may otherwise get radicalized; cf. COLLIER / COLLIER, p. 974.
15. Discussion with liberal (male) participant, Riyadh, July 2004.
16.cf. *Al-Watan* 10 July 2003.
17.SCHMITTER, p. 101.
18.SCHMITTER mentions co-optation as one function of corporatist institutions; Schmitter, p. 101.
19. The Jeddah chamber was formed almost 60 years ago, at a time when the Western province was economically dominant; cf. <http://jcci.org.sa/main_eng.html>.
20. Cf. the example of Switzerland in SCHMITTER / GROTE, p. 10.
21. The negotiation of economic policy in Saudi Arabia neatly fits SCHMITTER's account of authoritarian-technocra-tic policy-making which includes "[...]pre-emption of issues; co-optation of leaders; vertical or sectoral policy compart-mentalization...state technocratic planning and resource allocation; extensive development of functionally specialized, para-state agencies; political culture stressing formalism, consensus and continuous bargaining; symbiotic relations with clientelist and patrimonial practices in certain issues areas and regime levels[...]"(SCHMITTER 1974, p. 101). The Saudi set-up, although statist, also reminds one of concertations and high councils in European corporatism.
22. Interview with former deputy minister, Riyadh, May 2003.
23.SCHMITTER 96f.
24.cf. ADAMS, p. 23.
25. What is meant by “complexity”? At the risk of sounding like a crude modernization theorist, I suggest that this encompasses increased educational attainment of Saudis, differentiation and polarization of ideological views within society, and increase and

differentiation of demands towards government. Concurrently, the ossified state bureaucracy has reached its capacity limits, and ever increasing numbers of Saudis are in danger of being excluded from networks of distribution and patronage.
26. Examples include regulations setting national labour quotas, attempts at taxation, rules on the use of Arabic on public signs, the prohibition of satellite dishes and ineffectual vocational training efforts.
27.COLLIER / COLLIER, p. 970.
28.cf. Guillermo O'DONNELL, "Corporatism and the Question of the State", in: James A. MALLOY (ed.), Authoritarianism and Corporatism in Latin America (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press 1979), p. 47-88, p. 71.
29. The only overlap of formal politics and Islamic networks were the municipal elections in spring 2005, which informal Islamic lists duly won in most places thanks to their superior organization. The generally low level of participation in the elections seems to indicate the regime's troubles at mobilizing society.
30. Dirk VANDEWALLE has made similar arguments about Libya; cf. Dirk VANDEWALLE, *Libya Since Independence: Oil and State-Building* (London: I.B. Tauris 1998).
31.I have tried to analyze economic policies in such a system in “Segmented clientelism: the political economy of Saudi economic reform efforts” (paper presented at ISIM Saudi Arabia workshop in Leiden, Netherlands, April 2004; about to be published in volume edited by Paul AARTS and Gerd NONNEMAN).
32. This may have a parallel in the experience of the 1970s Indian government in the countryside, where Indira Gandhi's corporatist organization attempts floundered due to the resilience of traditional social structures (cf. BIANCHI 219f.). Similar to the Saudi experience, communication structures in the “neo-traditional” corporatism engineered by the military leadership of Niger proved to be ineffective in a traditional setting; Pearl T. ROBINSON, “Niger: Anatomy of a Neotraditional Corporatist State”, *Comparative Politics*, Vo. 24, n°. 1, October 1991, pp. 1-20, p. 13.
33.O'DONNELL, p. 77.
34.SCHMITTER mentions “periodic but systematic use of physical repression and anticipatory intimidation...” as a feature of state corporatism. Although Saudi Arabia is not highly repressive towards its dissidents, the arrests and the repeated threats by Minister of Interior Prince Nâ'if towards political activists fit the template; SCHMITTER, p. 101.
35. Robert R. KAUFMAN, “Corporatism, Clientelism, and Partisan Conflict”, in: MALLOY, p. 108-148, p. 111
36. Susan KAUFMAN PURCELL, “Mexico: Clientelism, Corporatism and Political Stability”, in: S.N. EISENSTADT / René LEMARCHAND, Political Clientelism, Patronage and Development (Beverly Hills, London: SAGE Publications 1981), pp. 191-216; cf. also Henry A. DIETZ, “Bureaucratic Demand-Making and Clientelistic Participation in Peru”, in: MALLOY; p. 413-458, p. 445.
37. Samuel HUNTINGTON, Political Order in Changing Societies (New Haven, London: Yale University Press 1968), p. 461.

ABSTRACTS

Steffen Hertog's article argues that Saudi Arabian regime has embarked upon the modernization of its authoritarian rule by attempting to institutionalize important aspects of the political debate. The way this is being done, he proposes, is best captured with the time-honoured concept of corporatism. It helps to bring the kingdom back into the framework of comparative politics, testing and giving new nuances to familiar concepts.

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