

Saudi-U.S. Relations

Information Service

Item of Interest

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Saudi Arabian Elections

By Thomas W. Lippman

Decades ago, at the start of my life in journalism, a wise old editor cautioned me never to use the word "unprecedented" in a newspaper article. Every time we say something is unprecedented, he said, we hear right away from readers telling us about the last time it happened.

I was reminded of that conversation recently as I read news accounts about Saudi Arabia's announcement that it would soon hold elections for municipal councils. All the articles I read said the elections would be the first in Saudi history--that is, unprecedented.

Well, that old editor was right. It turns out that Saudi Arabia, a monarchy in which all major public offices are filled by royal appointment, conducted elections for municipal councils in several cities and towns in the 1950s and early 1960s. These were spirited contests with real issues that stirred a high level of voter interest. Little has been written about them in English, and scholars are only now beginning to study the limited archival record of this intriguing chapter in Saudi history. The best-known popular chronicles of the kingdom make no mention of the elections, and several Saudi friends told me they had never heard about them.

Most of the available information in English comes from the archives of the Arabian American Oil Co., or Aramco, the consortium of four U.S. companies that developed the Saudi Arabian oil industry. Aramco--now nationalized and known as Saudi Aramco--has not made its files public, but copies of thousands of its internal documents are in the library at Georgetown University, courtesy of William E. Mulligan, a longtime Aramco official who left his papers to the school.

Aramco was more than an oil company. In the semi-primitive Saudi Arabia of the 1940s and 1950s, it was the principal provider of public services in the kingdom's Eastern Province, the vast region along the Persian Gulf where the oil fields are. Aramco built schools and roads, operated a hospital and clinics, constructed workers' housing and supplied electricity.

Aramco made it its business to know as much as possible about the inner workings of the Saudi government, which was no easy task in a society where all important decisions were made by the king and a handful of senior princes and advisers and there was no public accountability. The oil company created an entire department of Arabic-speaking scholars and political reporters whose assignment was to talk to the local people, visit towns and villages, monitor the Arabic-language press and compile dossiers on prominent individuals.

One of those scholars was Phebe Marr, who later gained renown as an authority on Iraq. She monitored several municipal elections, and copies of her typed reports -- on yellow onionskin paper -- constitute the bulk of the material about these contests in the Mulligan papers.

According to her accounts and other documents in the Aramco files, the practice of choosing municipal councils by vote instead of by appointment of the king's regional governor began as early as 1954 and continued at least into the early 1960s. It is not clear why the elections began or why they were discontinued, but the time frame coincides roughly with the reign of King Saud ibn Abdul Aziz, suggesting that they may have been a reform instituted as part of Saud's response to criticism from Egypt's fiery populist leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Real political power in Saudi Arabia, of course, derived from the king and from royal connections, just as it does today, but the municipal councils did have some authority. The councils allocated road-building money supplied by the central government, and could choose rights-of-way and acquire routes by eminent domain. In some towns they also controlled the extension of electricity hookups--as electric power became available, the designation of where the lines should run could make or break a local business.

Election issues varied from town to town. In one contest a slate of young, educated businessmen challenged an incumbent council of conservative landowners. (The old-timers won.) Another, in Hofuf, pitted candidates of the Sunni Muslim majority against minority Shiites. The Shiites, political and social outcasts, protested that the election rules were stacked against them; the local Emir cancelled the voting and scheduled a new election under new rules but the Shiites, who were demanding a Lebanon-style confessional system with seats allocated by percentage of the population, boycotted it.

The Shiite protest was not surprising. That election, unlike the others recounted in the Aramco files, was conducted under a system in which the only voters were "electors" chosen by the Amir as representative of the community. This was as if the members of the U.S. Electoral College were appointed by the White House chief of staff. In a district of some 20,000 inhabitants, only 50 or so were designated as electors, "all known and respected figures," meaning they were not Shiites. Describing the outcome, Marr noted that "the election is probably more significant in terms of those who did not get elected than in terms of those who did. The Shiites, who probably comprise at least half the population, are not represented at all. Neither is the growing economic middle class of contractors and businessmen, or the younger educated group engaged in teaching or government work."

In other communities, the elections seem to have been relatively wide open. The Aramco documents describe an electoral system in which all candidates and all voters were male. The minimum voting age was 21 in some districts, 18 in others. Candidates were required to be literate but voters were not. In some districts candidates nominated themselves and the contest was open to whoever wished to run; in others, candidate lists were issued by the royal governor, or Emir, ensuring that only the politically safe would be chosen. Campaigning was done face to face, in markets and coffee houses; television was new to Saudi Arabia in that era and programming was strictly nonpolitical.

No minimum number or percentage of votes was required to be elected; the nine men who got the most votes won. (In one election, 5,000 men were reported to have cast ballots, but the leading vote-getter was named on only 115.) Voting was by secret ballot. In most towns the ballots were tabulated by an election committee appointed by the Emir as voters and candidates watched. In one community where the Emir decreed that the ballots would be counted in his office, the voters objected with such vigor that he backed down and allowed an open tally.

One of Marr's reports describes the election of Sept. 6, 1960, in Dammam, a principal town of the oil region. Voting began at 5 p.m., after the day's heat had passed. As the election proceeded, "Nominees and their supporters kept a sharp eye out for any malpractice on the part of their opponents, and tried to spot anyone who might not be a bona fide resident. Several illiterate voters suspected by the committee members of handing in ballots written by someone else were made to vote again before the committee."

Throughout the evening, "There was a great deal of electioneering at the polls. Nominees and their supporters urged people to vote for them. Since there was no list of candidates, the most votes went to those who were best organized and had brought the most supporters."

Imagine that: In a provincial Saudi Arabian town in 1960s, the successful candidates were those who had the best organization and succeeded in getting their supporters to the polls. In fact, Marr found a surprising level of political sophistication surrounding this contest. Voters interviewed at the polls, she wrote, "admitted being influenced by what they had heard of the current election campaign in the United States and the techniques employed by [Richard M.] Nixon and [John F.] Kennedy," then running for the presidency.

A full evaluation of the place of these elections in Saudi history and Saudi political thought will probably not be possible until scholars have gained access to whatever records may have been kept by the Saudi authorities. Based on the skimpy documentation available in English, we do not even know the reaction of the Saudi people to the abandonment of local elections. Yet it is apparent that the decision to reinstate them, if carried out next year, will not be so radical a departure from past practice as it has been portrayed.

The Saudis of the 1950s and early 1960s had no trouble understanding the nature of the electoral process and the power of citizen participation. In fact, Saudi understanding of the power of the ballot box is the reason many Saudis caution against U.S. pressure to institute elections for a national government. If the people of Saudi Arabia were given the freedom to choose their own representatives, in the current climate of anger at the United States throughout the Arab world, we Americans probably would not like the outcome.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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