Moderation in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia:

An Analysis of 'Pragmatist' and 'Puritanical' Discourses

Submitted by Eid Al Yahya to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Politics in December 2011.

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30/11/2011

ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the rise of moderation in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The investigation consists of analysis of two trends of thought which reformulate the ideas and projects of an earlier generation of dissidence. These trends, which have adopted a clearly more 'accommodationist' discourse towards difference of opinion, peaceful coexistence, political competition, equality, pluralism, and gender inclusiveness, have adapted themselves to a new context of social revolution.

This social revolution has resulted from the expansion of links with the outside world, and this has been deepened through the process of 'reintellectualisation'. This term used by scholars of Muslim politics such as Dale Eickelman is used in the dissertation to contextualise the rise of discourses of moderation. In particular, this reintellectualisation relates to two processes, which are gradually changing the culture in the direction of more public debate, participation and acceptance of values of dialogue and diversity in general. The first is the media revolution which increased the flow of information and the other is the massification of university education abroad. These two combined factors contribute to a quasi-cultural shift in Saudi society. This dynamic is not acknowledged by Orientalist scholarship that treats the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as incompatible with change.

The key objective of the dissertation is to analyse the discourses of moderation of two prominent trends of thought, which are called here 'pragmatists' (not liberals) and 'puritanical' (not conservative). It is through this investigation that the key values they both associate with moderation become clear. The investigation uses discourse analysis of primary data both spoken and written. These two combined sources disclose a number of preliminary observations. The pragmatist trend is not fully secular and is still influenced by the politico-religious identity of the Kingdom. Its discourse of moderation relies on Western values and concepts but these values and concepts are not in any way anti-Islamic. The puritanical trend puts the politico-religious tradition into sharper focus, showing attachment to the agenda of *da'wa* and the normative framework of Islam's socio-moral order. However, this trend shows signs of moderation that is no longer concerned with issues of *jihad*, and is venturing into areas of political reform having to do with just government, equal citizenship, and forms of inclusiveness within the normative system of Islam.

It is concluded that moderation as pluralism, ideological moderation and respect of the rules of the political game has the building blocks of maturation in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Its specificity within the Saudi politico-religious context, moderation for the pragmatists is aided through synthesis whereas for the puritanical trend it is expressed through reformulation of the existing religious heritage.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Praise be to God who granted me the strength, the health and the commitment to complete this work.

My thanks are due to the University of Exeter, its politics department where I have been a PhD student since 2004. I had to interrupt several times due to my brother's and mother's illness. All along these personal low points, the politics department supported me and granted me permission to interrupt my research on several occasions.

I am grateful to my supervisor, Dr Larbi Sadiki, who believed in me, pushed me to do better, and always surprised me with his knowledge and modesty as an academic, and with his warmth as a person. He gave me guidance and at the same time gave me space to think for myself.

Dr Mick Dumper, my second supervisor, gave useful feedback, which helped me through my progression. I thank him for his support over the years. My thanks are extended to Dr Andy Schaap who was very supportive throughout.

I will always have but respect and gratitude for the University of Exeter's superb librarian Paul Auchterlonie.

I owe a huge debt to His Royal Highness Prince Turki Al Faisal whose moral and financial support made it possible for me to complete this PhD. He stood by me and my project from beginning to end. I owe a similar debt to Faisal Abdulrahman Ibn Mu'ammar who granted me a long sabbatical from work a few times over the past seven years to free myself completely to my thesis. The same goes for Dr Yahya in the Faisal Islamic Studies Centre, Riyad.

I must thank my French friends: Madame Martine Brisset, her mum Jacqueline Brisset, and Professor Maryvonne Dubois. They were generous and allowed me to use their home when preparing the final draft.

Finally I owe a special debt of gratitude to my family, my wife, my son Faisal, and my new baby daughter Effat who put up with my absence from their lives when conducting research far away from home. I dedicate this PhD to my parents whose support and love was inspiring and vital, and to my brother whose illness forced me to abandon my PhD in order to look after him and stand by him several times when he came close to death. Praise be to God he is still alive for me to share with him the joy of completing this work.