

SAUDI ARABIA : ITS POLITICAL TACTICS

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The recent conference at the UN on the issue of religious tolerance is initiated by Saudi Arabia. Over a dozen world leaders are expected to attend this conference including US President, British Prime Minister, Israeli President and heads of seven Arab states.

In politics, certain moves are made as show business. Saudi Arabia's role in this respect is relevant. Commenting on Saudi Arabia, Human Rights Watch Organization has issued a statement calling on Saudi Arabia to practise at the domestic level what its monarchs talk about in showcases of public meeting such as the current one at the UN. A Shiite Muslim dissident now living in Washington in a state of exile said : 'It is like apartheid South Africa having a conference at the UN on racial harmony'. One can present a similar analogy of Myanmar, the worst autocratic regime in Asia holding a conference on Democracy.

The monarchic role of Saudi Arabia and its control over Islamic holy places, Mecca and Medina was once criticized by Ayatolla Khomeini of Iran who said that monarchy is not acceptable in Islamic faith. This represents a controversy regarding Saudi Arabia among Islamic forces..

Saudi Arabia represents a strange combination of feudalism, religious fundamentalism and modern economy of so-called free enterprise. In 1926 after a series of tribal wars Abdel Ibn Saud crowned himself as King and in 1932 he named the entire landmass as Saudi Arabia. The modern form of feudalism is illustrated by the fact that Ibn Saud built for himself a marble palace in Riyadh costing \$4 million merely to plan and \$140 million to complete it.

It is the only state in the world that is titled as the property of a single dynasty. America would not have cared for its existence, if it did not have its oil resources. The Saudi kingdom supplies about half of America's petroleum needs. The profit from oil supply is enjoyed by the Saudi family tracing back to its founder. The family covers hundreds of people since the founder of the state himself married several times and all members of the family get money from its oil revenues. Without the oil resources, the country would have turned into strange, weird country neglected by America.

Here are some illustrations of the odd linkage between feudalism and modernism, religious fundamentalism and free enterprise.

A report in the British media last year said that the British Ministry of Defence paid one billion pounds to Prince Bandar of Saudi Arabia following Britain's big arms deal with the country. Britain's big arms dealer BAE System spent upto 120 million pounds a year into two Saudi accounts in Washington.

ARAMCO (Arabian American Oil Company) operates the oil industry in Saudi Arabia. It started production of oil in Saudi Arabia in 1938 and continued the business since then. In 1951 it built a prestige railway for King Ibn Saud at a cost of over \$160 million. US Government assists ARAMCO by providing tax benefits for their work in Saudi Arabia.

Washington helps Saudi Arabia economically and politically and often justifies their operation. During the cold war period, Saudi Arabia's status was supported on geopolitical and geoeconomic grounds. In 1957, American ambassador to Saudi Arabia praised the regime. King Saud, he said, is 'a good king who has the welfare of the people primarily in mind' (*Arabia Without Sultans*, by Fred Halliday, 1975). When King Saud visited America in 1957 President Eisenhower took the unusual step of greeting him in person at the airport, courtesy he had not extended to no other head of state up to that time.

When Saudi King Abdullah visited England in October two years ago, he was offered a special banquet hosted by the Queen of England. It was a big show business. Six planes brought the king and his huge entourage to the airport. A convoy of 84 limousines drove Saudi King's party into London.

American support for Saudi feudal monarchy continues today, often taking subtle sophisticated media manipulation. ARAMCO which operates Saudi oil industry publishes a colourful magazine entitled *Saudi Aramco World* which presents favourable views of the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Excerpts from an issue of the magazine (January-February, 2007) to display the positive side of the Arab and Muslim culture are self-explanatory. A quotation from a British Muslim named Timothy Winter in an article entitled 'The Art of Integration' said : Islam makes for the particularities of the peoples who come into it. The traditional Muslim world is a rainbow, an extra-ordinary patchwork of different cultures all united by a common adherence to the doctrinal and moral patterns set down in Revelation'.

The article deals with mosques in Britain with colourful pictures and a short note on their presence in China. "When Muslim Arabs first traveled to China nearly 1300 years ago, they were not in fact

introducing an alien religion to an already long-established civilization. Rather,they called their Islam 'the Way of the Pure' a name and an ideal that did not conflict with the Confucian beliefs prevalent in China at that time-and their early mosques looked like Chinese temples and pagodas."

In the context of the darker side of politics and economics currently operating in the Middle East this type of commentary ignores the fact that US economic interests provide material guidelines and Religion the ideological justification for current oligarchy. □□□