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Author
Hamilton, Katherine

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Katherine Hamilton is a graduate student in the Politics Department at UC Santa Cruz. Before resuming her graduate studies, she was assistant program manager in the Special Projects Office of CSU, Chico’s International Programs.

Straddler-based Gender Reform in Saudi Arabia: The Case of Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry

This essay inquires into the process of gender role negotiation in Saudi Arabia by examining the dynamics of organizations that straddle ambiguous state-society boundaries and how they have been used to pioneer successful gender reform initiatives in the conservative oil kingdom. The specific case of inquiry is the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI), the leading organization in which women were elected to governance positions for the first time in the history of Saudi Arabia. The JCCI also became the prototype for a series of successful initiatives that established business women’s councils in the main Chambers of Commerce and Industry (CCIs) across the country. In the context of the JCCI narrative, the essay makes a number of claims: 1) the dynamics of associational life in Saudi Arabia constitute crucial negotiation sites of the current governance reform process taking shape in the country; 2) that a “straddler” focus of analysis provides a useful model for inquiry into gender articulation in Saudi Arabia; and 3) that “straddler” organizations were indispensable for the success of pioneering feminist reformers in the country and the discursive shifts they achieved. State laws and regulations that set the rules for the corporatist arrangement of Saudi CCIs and their internal governance were examined. The web presence of national and regional CCIs were also analyzed in terms of the information that they provided to the public, the primacy of gender reform issues in their presentation, and the ability of users to connect with businesswomen councils and their leaders.

It is important to note that many theoretical tools developed to inquire into civil society in the context of the Western experience make assumptions that do not lend them well to the study of the Saudi space. Theoretical models that assume clear cut boundaries between states and civil society, and which are based in the assumption of inherent conflict between the two, may overlook possibilities for
cooperative associational arrangements that deliver public goods in the areas of social capital creation and increased democratic participation—the same goods that civil society is assumed to deliver.

Benjamin Read (2009) contends that civil society theorists have largely overlooked that such public goods are not automatic: “organizations independent from government have no monopoly on civic qualities, and that sometimes the state can—perhaps surprisingly—do more good than harm as it engages associational life.”

This inquiry is informed by the model put forth in Read et al (2009) that considers the role straddler organizations may have in associational life. The case study of the JCCI illustrates how reformers were able to utilize a straddler arrangement to initiate and advance a process of gender reform and integrate these reforms into the wider legitimacy of the Shari’ah.

Efforts aimed at reforming the dynamics governing the female sphere of activities in Saudi Arabia face daunting impediments. The discursive strategies employed by the state in the construction of its political legitimacy credentials with the culturally conservative elements of the society have framed the regime as the protector of women’s honor and is intimately connected to Saudi national identity. The powerful and resonant symbols and narratives employed complicate the entire environment surrounding what woman do or don’t do because now questions of loyalty to God, Country, and King are involved with severe consequences for both the regime and the individual citizen. As Amélie Le Renard argues, the political discourse of women continues to be integral to the “process of authoritarian consolidation, renewing the modalities of elites’ integration and the regime’s legitimacy.”

Governance in Saudi Arabia is a complex negotiation between intersecting social groupings that involve together royal and commoner, tribal chieftain and urban professional, official bureaucrat and merchant, and so on. Reform in the conservative kingdom involves negotiating volatile fault-lines

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between cultural conservatives and liberal reformers. These competing social forces seek to legitimate their respective agendas in Shari’ah juridical terms. As “rightful resisters,” all parties appeal to Islamic discourses expressly upheld by the state in order to advance the legitimacy of their case and put pressure on the other and consequently on the main arbiter, the House of Saud itself. The Shari’ah is not only the declared legal basis of the state; it is also the taken for granted or ‘doxic’ framework of arbitration in society.

Reform measures are spurred by the interplay of international and regional pressures and emerging social realities in the kingdom that bear on regime stability. There is a growing sense, especially in the reformist camp, that change is inevitable. The reformist camp enjoys the support of the current king, Abdullah Bin-Abd-al-Aziz Al-Saud, and an increasingly visible number of educated and professional women in the royal family and the main merchant (and tribal) clans in the country. The support of the king is never taken for granted by the reformist camp; his is a qualified support based in the continued capacity of the House of Saud to remain the main arbiter between competing groups in society. Regularly, Al-Saud take an initial back seat in such competitions until the critical junctures for arbitration vital to their staying power require intervention. In other cases, where Al-Saud may want to establish (or cease) an initiative, intricate networks of state surrogates and allies begin to carry forward varying agendas in multiple and often overlapping social and governmental arenas.

Chambers of Commerce and Industry: a Saudi Corporatist Arrangement

Chambers of Commerce and Industry (CCIs) in Saudi Arabia wield considerable power. As quasi-governmental entities, not only do they certify and process all documents necessary to conduct

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7 Scharpf, Elizabeth. “All the King’s Feminists,” Women’s Policy Journal of Harvard. Vol. 4, Summer 2007. In contrast to current king, Fahd’s was compelled to empower the cultural conservatives because his religious legitimacy credentials were weak, resulting in the politicization of what women do and their presence in the public sphere.
8 David Pool notes, in “Civil Society: Active or passive?” in Politics in the Developing World, that “Since founding the state the Saud family has embedded itself in government and administration, invariably holding key positions like defence, foreign affairs, security, and provincial governorships. Other members are spread through important ambassadorships, the military and security establishment, and government commissions” (p. 290).
business in the kingdom, they also engage in the arbitration of commercial disputes, community development planning, and encourage volunteerism. The corporatist arrangement of modern CCIs was regulated by a series of Saudi laws the last of which was the Chambers of Commerce and Industry Regulation of 1400H/1980. It defines a chamber organization as a non-profit entity (governed also by relevant regulations for non-profit entities) with membership comprised of merchants and industrialists in the region it serves. It sets basic guidelines for membership (literacy for example is required), payment of dues, general duties and commercial regulatory responsibilities. The regulation also sets the rules for the composition of the governing board and its electoral parameters. In that regard, the board of directors is comprised of members elected by the local general membership (2/3 of the seats allocated to elected members) in addition to those appointed by the Ministers of Trade and Industry (the remaining 1/3 of the BOD seats). CCIs pass their decisions with simple majority (2/3 majority required for certain matters). Although no express veto power is awarded the government in the regulation, an implicit value of deferring to the crown if required is recognized by national default (as all parties depend on the state as the final arbiter).

The story of Khadijah bint Khuwailed Center (KBKC) and the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI) illustrates how the dynamics of associational life in Saudi Arabia constitute indispensable components of the current governance reform process taking shape in the country. They also illustrate how straddler organizations improved the chances of success for gender reform initiatives. In 1991, Nadia Baeshen a former vice dean of the College of Business and Economics at the leading King Abdul-Aziz University (KAAU) in Jeddah, declined to renew her contract with the university and left for the private sector.9 She had been frustrated with reports of the possible closing of the female sections of KAAU because of the lack of employment opportunities for female graduates. These large numbers of educated women were disappointed to find little or no opportunities for

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employment beyond a limited number of openings in traditional public positions held by women (teaching, medicine, female bureaucracy). It was then that Baeshen turned her attention to the private sector and networked with the leadership of the JCCI which took the pioneering political step to hire her as a consultant to build training and outreach programs that would increase female business capacity in the region. This initial step led to Baeshen founding the Khadijah Bint Khuwailed Center (KBKC) for business women inside the structure of the JCCI. The invocation of the name of Lady Khadijah bint Khuwailed, the first wife of the Prophet Mohammad PBUH, who was also his employer prior to their marriage and a major economic player in ancient Mecca, should be highlighted for its tactical significance in overcoming conservative opposition. The invocation of Lady Khadijah brought forth into the discursive struggle “the rightfulness” under Islam of women not only to participate in business and entrepreneurship, but the right to negotiate spaces outside of the home necessary to conduct their affairs. Lady Khadijah’s example of business entrepreneurship provided the initial juridical cover for Baeshen and her embryonic team of reformists to lay the ground work for the success that followed (albeit not immediately).

From the very beginning, Baeshen received the support of the Secretary General of the JCCI, Abdullah Dahlan, who had taken the initial daring step of hiring her on as a consultant for the Chamber to facilitate her reformist agenda. An initial grouping of male merchant reformers supported her by donating land and logistics for the center to be built under the umbrella of JCCI. The KBKC attracted greater participation of women and even turned a profit from its resource center library activity fees. Most importantly, it continued to increase its legitimacy among Jeddah’s economic elites and other chamber members as it recruited and retrained women professionals into private sector

10 A royal decree in 1985 prohibited women from employment in all fields of work apart from female education and nursing. It also prohibited women and girls under any circumstances from associating with men in the workplace or facilities attached to them” (Altorki, 230-231). The Council of Ministers passed a law in September 2005 allowing women the right to work in any occupation that “suits their nature” and is aimed at raising the Saudization of jobs to 75% (Ghafour 2005). The phrase “suits their nature” is open to interpretation by both cultural liberals and conservatives. Legitimacy in relation to Islam and the Shar’iah are omnipresent components in the discussion of problems and solutions. Islamist discourses are not monolithic and their negotiation contains great diversity and nuance.

11 Mokhtar, 2007
12 Ibid.
opportunities. It also contributed to the body of regulatory feedback to government planning bodies and ministries that the chamber provides in the course of its duties thus grafting itself as a legitimate information partner on women entrepreneurial and human resource development issues.\textsuperscript{13}

Realizing in 1995 that nothing in the regulations governing CCIs precluded women from running for the board of directors, the early coalition among the chamber’s membership turned their sights to the electoral process. Even though no women ran for election in the first years, the educational and participatory efforts of the reformists culminated in the candidate list that included seventeen women members that made history in 2005. Although women members were still a minority of voters, the sweeping victory of two women elected to the board reflected the success of the reformers in the education of the JCCI male public.\textsuperscript{14} It also resulted from the legitimacy they gained with the Saudi state itself (the king specifically) for their application of “rightful resistance” actions to achieve reform. These activists delivered necessary reforms in a manner that did not create havoc for the balancers, and they did so while incubated in the belly of a very important Saudi “straddler” organization, the JCCI.

The momentum of these achievements, especially in terms of creating a legitimate space for gender reform in the CCI sector, resulted in the rapid growth of similar initiatives nationwide. The drive to expand the process and integrate women in the governance of CCIs spread quickly into most regions of the kingdom, even hyperconservative ones in Saudi Arabia’s “Wahabi belt” where the powerful Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and the Elimination of Vice has a large following and influence. Frequently, these initiatives are led (or tacitly supported) by female royal members. These royal women are themselves products of the great educational investment Saudi Arabia made in female education over the past 40 years.\textsuperscript{15} Many times they share some of the frustrations of their peers.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.


of educated (but underutilized) women professionals. Nonetheless, their position is even more sensitive than nonroyal members as they represent the monarchy and their activities in relation to controversial agendas are more complicated. It would have been more difficult for them to act without the space of legitimacy that KBKC and the JCCI provided.

The CCIs straddling arrangement in this case delivered the effective starting point for this group of feminist reformers in Saudi Arabia. The basic Saudi law (1400 H- 1980) which regulates the corporatist arrangement of the CCIs relative to electing its board of directors allowed for a vanguard of business and professional women (for the first time in Saudi history) to reach governance positions in organizations that are central to the operation of the Saudi economy.\(^\text{16}\) The success continued in December 2009, when Lama Al Suleiman was elected first deputy chairman of the JCCI’s board of directors. Although in the recent 2009 elections in the Eastern Province none of the three women candidates were elected to the board, two women were appointed.\(^\text{17}\) One commentator explains that the elections were “tainted from the beginning” when three men from the Eastern Province claimed in the complaint with the Asharqia Chamber that the women should not run for election because it is contrary to the Shari’ah.\(^\text{18}\) Women leaders from the JCCI offered their support, viewing this first run as preparatory to future gains in the more conservative regions of the kingdom.

Within the limited empirical work of this analysis, it is fair to conclude that the JCCI straddler model was indispensable to delivering gendered reform. Moreover, the vertical connection to the Saudi government provided empowerment to the horizontal social reform agenda as it incubated and connected it to royal elements supportive of reform. In fact, the straddler activity here seems to have provided a space of mitigation of gender currents inside the royal house and advanced the technical

\(^\text{16}\) Riyadh Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Regulatory Law. CCIs in Saudi Arabia post a wide category of regulatory law on their websites in Arabic. A link in Arabic aimed at women is prominent on the first page of these official sites. That these links aren’t on the first page in the English language version, as they are on the Arabic sites, suggests that the message being conveyed is intended for a local domestic audience. (http://www.riyadhchamber.com/proceduresn.php?page=getresult)

\(^\text{17}\) Wahab, Siraj, “Two women appointed to in the EP chamber board” in Arab News. Monday 11 January 2010 (25 Muharram 1431)

\(^\text{18}\) Jawar, Sabriah S., “Women let down by female voters” in the Saudi Gazette, January 13, 2010
capacity of the government to address gender reform agendas. All of these elements along with an enhanced awareness of gender-related issues across the ecological space of reform in Saudi Arabia are consistent with the desired deliverables of the associational life envisioned by traditional civil society theorists. Perhaps in cases like Saudi Arabia, a cooperative approach to the problem through straddler innovation might deliver effectively towards enduring reform.
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