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Much international attention is certain to be focused on the coming municipal council elections in Saudi Arabia. For the first time in the Kingdom's history, citizens will vote for representatives in 178 municipal councils across all cities and villages in the 13 provinces. The Riyadh province will hold elections first on Feb. 10. The four southern provinces and the Eastern Province will hold them March 3. The rest of the country will complete elections after Hajj on April 21.

Among foreigners, many American political analysts will be eager to comment and pass judgment on what transpires. These analysts will be especially keen to assess whether the end results adhered to their preconceived views of what a successful electoral process and actual elections entail.

Media pundits will be focusing not only on the process of voter and candidate identification and registration, but also on campaigning, balloting and the extent to which civil society elements, such as the leaders of professional associations, chambers of commerce, academe and the media, will have a role to play.

These and other analysts also will examine the means by which the winners are determined, the nature and effectiveness of dispute resolution mechanisms in the event that candidates and voters have complaints and whether the overall experience is deemed legitimate.

Witnessing at close hand the enhancement of popular participation in any country's national development process is hardly an everyday occurrence. For context, this writer has been an official observer for all three of neighboring Yemen's presidential and parliamentary elections in 1993, 1997 and 2003. Being able to mix among national political leaders and ordinary folk alike when the citizens of a unified Yemen voted to elect their country's representatives for the first, second and third times has been an exceptional experience that provides a frame of reference for this author's ability to critically analyze the upcoming Saudi elections.

Electoral process specialists from afar not only examine closely how a country determines its leaders and representatives via the ballot box. When requested, they also serve as consultants for voters, candidates and election management bodies. On one hand, they are often able to recommend ways to strengthen the overall electoral environment; on the other, from the perspective of having viewed the elections firsthand, they are able to offer an assessment of whether, in their view, the elections were "free and fair." When various minor, inadvertent and easily remedial defects are

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acknowledged to have occurred, observers are often also able to indicate the degree to which they believe the electoral process and its results were “open and transparent.”

CONSENT OF THE GOVERNED

In most regions of the world, there are countries whose governments and electoral processes are inspired by various democratic ideals and principles. Likewise, among their respective citizenries are those whose needs, concerns and interests are “indirectly represented” by individuals they elected to governmental executive, legislative and/or consultative branches.

With this as but one among other criteria for analysis, the differences between Saudi Arabia’s municipal and other forms of government and those of many countries elsewhere are fewer and of less consequence than many claim. Where numerous differences exist – and they do – it is not in each and every case either logical or factual to infer that one or the other system is “better” or “worse” because of the differences. What not so much distinguishes but rather narrows the difference between the United States and Saudi Arabia in this context is that both acknowledge that a primary requirement for obtaining and sustaining legitimacy is that those who would govern obtain the consent of the governed.

For starters, applying Thomas Jefferson’s definition of democracy as “the consent of the governed,” Saudi Arabia’s system of governance, at virtually every level, is hardly bereft of popular consent. To the contrary, honoring and practicing the politics of consent has been a requirement that Saudi Arabians have demanded of all the country’s leaders from the beginning. Indeed, variations of the concept have always been synonymous with the quintessential core of the government’s existence and operations, as well as its legitimacy.

Further, the dynamics of decision- and policy-making in Saudi Arabia are neither fundamentally nor, in many cases, substantially different from the relationship dynamics between governors and governed in the United States. Whether through meetings with constituents in person or communicating with them via mobile telephone, e-mail and other ways, the interplay of government and politics in the two countries bears more than a passing resemblance in style and substance than many are aware.

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Consider the style and legacies of former U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson and former U.S. Rep. Sam Rayburn. While neither politician was particularly charismatic or renowned for their eloquence either in speaking or writing, they were able to establish a strong relationship with Congress and the American people to pass their agenda.

Indeed, what Johnson and Rayburn personified – the practice of politics as the art of the possible – has long been on display among leaders in Saudi Arabia, where the politics of consultation and consensus have been joined at the hip.

REPRESENTATIONAL DYNAMICS

Many American and Saudi Arabian leaders rightly believe that “all politics are local.” As such, large numbers, but by no means all, regard Riyadh’s decision to begin the country’s national experiment in electoral politics at the municipal level as only appropriate and prudent. Not least among the reasons is that it is at this most basic unit of governance and political representation that matters of public policy affect the citizenry most directly. Further, while many Americans and Saudis would prefer to see a more rapid reconfiguration of the country’s political dynamics, many others beg to differ. In doing so, they emphasize that there is inherent wisdom in not being rushed and that there is potentially much merit in being able to study at length the results of electing leaders to municipal councils first.

The defining characteristics of the way in which political reforms have been introduced in the Kingdom are neither entirely new nor limited to the local level. For nearly a decade various representational features have already been incorporated into Saudi Arabia’s appointed national consultative council – the Majlis Al-Shoura – of 120 members. The same features also have been integrated into the similarly appointed councils in each of the country’s 13 provinces.

To be sure, many foreign commentators scoff at the very notion that political representation has worked its way into what, in their view, is synonymous with a significant niche within the country’s political system. But those who hold to such views have either spent little or no time in the Kingdom, or they failed to observe these and other dimensions of the governing process at firsthand.

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GENDER ISSUES

It is true that a prominent feature regarding the nature of Saudi Arabia's coming elections is the absence of women candidates. Among the many outsiders looking for any reason to further discount the long-standing bilateral relationship between Riyadh and Washington, D.C., there are likely to be those who find this shortcoming as one reason for panning the entire process and its results.

The fact that Saudi Arabian women will not be candidates this time around has been criticized by many international commentators. However, sentiment within the Kingdom with regard to this issue is not nearly as negative as that espoused by foreign critics. As with women's issues elsewhere the world over, including the United States, there is as yet no place on Earth where women are able to possess and practice their rights without regard to gender to the same degree as men.

Even so, in a universally imperfect world with regard to gender equality, Saudi Arabia continues apace in its efforts to expand the degree of popular representation, including that of women, in public affairs. One example is the diverse nature of the appointees to the country's national consultative council.

A second example is that, notwithstanding the absence of female members in the same forum, prominent women regularly attend the council's sessions. They also serve as advisers to the council on issues related to women, family and children – issues that perforce often pertain to matters of public policy as they relate to economics and commerce.

Another example is the convening in the past year of female-only conventions where the participants contributed to an ongoing national dialogue on how best to address the many needs of women that are different from men. A fourth example is the significantly broadened outreach of women-owned business establishments and professional associations with a view to enhancing still further the involvement of women in the public and private sectors.

As a result of these moves, many of the country's women are confident that, on matters relating to electoral politics and representation, they are almost certain to acquire and be able to practice unhindered an array of rights and privileges that their sisters in more developed industrial nations took many generations longer to obtain.

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STAGGERED ELECTORAL PROCESS

Among many of the same critics are those certain to take issue also with the decision to stagger the elections' timing and sequence. As it is, the elections are scheduled to occur consecutively. As such, they will take place in a manner similar to the spacing between the United States' political primaries and conventions rather than the more common – but by no means universal – process of holding them all on the same day.

The decision to elect only half the municipal councils' members this time and appoint the other half has been criticized by some as an overly timid and cautious first step. But just as many others, if not larger numbers, disagree. They do so because they view the matter from a different perspective. They reason that it is in keeping with a long-standing cultural and societal proclivity not to introduce national reformist measures all at once.

More particularly, this alternate viewpoint reflects an eagerness among some analysts and activists to benefit from what transpires well or poorly at the rate of one election at a time. In this way, they reckon there will be a greater likelihood of being able to incorporate or avoid certain aspects of the experience in subsequent elections.

Such perspectives are not grounded in idle speculation. The world abounds with vivid examples of what can result when countries seek to accelerate the implementation of governmental and political reforms without adequate prior consideration of the implications.

EXTERNAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Saudi decision to introduce elections only at the municipal localities and not at the regional and national levels in the immediate near-term also has been criticized. However, not least among the considerations influencing the government's decision in this regard were the broader international and regional dynamics in play with regard to Iran, Iraq and the Eastern Mediterranean.

The potentially negative implications of any of these regional challenges, which are hardly far-fetched, provided the government what it believed were prudent and persuasive reasons why the first elections should be held at the municipal level.

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For the foreseeable future, the experience of three major Middle Eastern wars during the past 25 years and current ones whose future course is uncertain are likely to continue having a sobering impact on the timing and substance of the political and other reforms that are underway.

Ensuring an ability to maintain peace and stability and to protect the legitimate interests of one's citizens at home and abroad is never an issue of marginal concern. It remains an overriding consideration for the governments of many countries in Arabia and the Gulf, just as it does for the United States.

Moreover, the steady foreign militant drumbeat against neighboring Iran and fellow League of Arab States member Syria is hardly reassuring. Weighing the potential implications of American and Israeli threats to those two countries is a task that neither Saudi Arabian leaders, nor any other Arab or Islamic leaders, can afford to take lightly.

For these reasons, and given their country's position and role in Arab and Islamic affairs, many Saudi Arabian modernists are prone to question whether the near-term is the most optimum for introducing reformist measures in the areas of governance and elections.

For perspective, even the government of Great Britain, the "mother of parliaments," decided it was the better part of wisdom not to hold elections during World War II. Moreover, prior to America's most recent elections this past fall, the edginess of electoral officials throughout the country was palpable.

Indeed, there were reports of studies conducted by the federal government that considered the pros and cons of postponing the elections in the event that some unforeseen national tragedy occurred.

Viewed in this light, there is an understandable and broad-based reluctance among Saudi officials to authorize the country's popularly elected bodies to address anything and everything that, under circumstances that were potentially less foreboding, would not only have merit, but also be unlikely to impact negatively on stability.

This is especially the case with regard to issues that relate to domestic security and external defense. If for no other reasons than these two, the near-term is likely to see the elected municipal councilors limit the scope and focus of their considerations. For the time being at least, these considerations will most likely center on matters that

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affect their constituents most directly, such as health, education and welfare services, as well as the economy and business.

MOMENTUM

These and other Saudis also charge that the momentum with which the government has reached even this modest stage of expanded political participation has been slower than they had hoped.

But in every country there are those who are more capable and willing than others to cope with the implications stemming from the speed with which societal reforms are introduced.

If what has happened in other Arab and Islamic countries is any guide, what tends to happen over time is a gradual expansion of elected deputies' license to address a steadily increasing number of public policy issues.

In response to these and other criticisms and questions, Saudis responsible for ensuring that the elections take place at specifically scheduled places and dates have hardly been reluctant to explain why certain procedures are being adopted and others are not. Indeed, they have generally been quite forthcoming in providing context, background and perspective as to the way in which the process has been structured for what is, after all, a first-time experiment.

LIKELY MUNICIPAL PREROGATIVES

In advance of the election of municipal councilors in Saudi Arabia, what is unknown is the exact extent to which the councilors on their own initiative will be free to discuss and debate matters of public policy or introduce new legislation, rules or regulations.

More likely, in keeping with national mores and customs, is that the councils will proceed initially in close consultation with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and other government agencies that cater to the needs and interests of the citizenry at the grassroots level.

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RIAL POLITIK AND ‘DOLLAR-OCRACY’?

Among activist and enlightened citizenries worldwide there is increasing emphasis on introducing transparency to the ways in which government officials go about conducting the public’s business. In this context, Saudi Arabia not only has much experience but would seem to be reasonably well-prepared to continue exploring the possibilities for further movement in this direction.

The dynamics of consultation and consensus in Saudi Arabia are almost certain to remain essential components of good governance that concerned citizens – not as a matter of convenience or preference, but as a matter of right and custom – will continue to insist on being able to witness in action.

On the other hand, what one has yet to see in play in Saudi Arabia’s near-term elections, and what many of the country’s leaders are determined to avoid in the foreseeable future, if at all possible, is any effort to import the U.S. system by which political campaigns are financed.

Neither in Saudi Arabia nor in most other countries is there the slightest sign thus far of citizens wanting to adopt a U.S.-like system for becoming an elected official. More specifically, there is strong disagreement with the professed merits of what many U.S. officials appear so eager to export to other countries, but which election officials and political scientists the world over see, to the contrary, as a seriously flawed system. Like fingerprints and snowflakes, no two countries are the same. Instead, each is shaped by its own historical, geographical, cultural, economic and social circumstances. Accordingly, Saudi Arabia’s systems of governance and political participation will most likely not conform anytime soon, if ever, to what those intent on reconfiguring other people’s societies would prefer.

Instead, what is far more likely to occur in Saudi Arabia is something else. It is that the nature, pace and extent of its respective reforms in governance and political participation will not only continue along its own distinctive path, but in accordance with a timetable determined by their citizens’ own articulated needs, interests and objectives, not those of someone else from either near or afar.