

Two Saudi women win in landmark election

First polls in which women could either vote or stand

RIYADH: Two women have won seats on a Jiddah chamber of commerce, the first to win any elected position in Saudi Arabia, where women remain largely barred from political life, officials said on Wednesday.

Lama al-Sulaiman and Nashwa Taher were elected to the Jiddah Trade and Industry Chamber, officials at the chamber said on Wednesday, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to talk to the media.

The chamber's elections on Saturday and Sunday were the first polls in Saudi Arabia in which women could either vote or stand. In the kingdom's first nationwide municipal elections early this year, women were neither allowed to vote nor stand as candidates. Electoral officials said women might be allowed to vote in the 2009 municipal polls.

The Jiddah Trade and Industry Chamber had initially rejected the nomination of 10 women for its board of governors, but the Government ordered it to allow female voters and candidates.

In the polls, Ms. Al-Sulaiman received 1,138 votes, and Ms. Taher received 1,015 votes, the officials said.

Women make up about 10 per cent of the 40,000 members of the Jiddah chamber. The two women will become members of an 18-person board that had previously been exclusively for men.

Jiddah, a port on the Red Sea coast, is the kingdom's second largest city after Riyadh.

King Abdullah, who ascended the throne in August, has said he wishes to promote



*Saudi businesswoman
Lama al-Suleiman.* - PHOTO: AFP

the status of women, who are heavily restricted. They may not drive a car, and a male guardian must give permission for a woman to travel abroad.

Earlier this year, female business executives in the eastern city of Dammam were allowed to vote in their chamber of commerce polls, but only if a male guardian cast their ballots for them. - AP

02 DEC 2005

2 Saudi women win in Jeddah local polls

Riyadh, Nov. 30 (Reuters): Two Saudi women triumphed today in an unprecedented election to a local business group, the first vote in the conservative Muslim kingdom where women campaigned openly for office.

"I'm a bit in shock, but this shows people are ready for women to play a role," said Lama Sulaiman, one of two businesswomen to win a seat on the 18-strong board of Jeddah's Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The vote in the relatively liberal city of Jeddah is seen as a landmark for Saudi women after they were barred from voting or standing in elections to municipal councils earlier this year.

Sulaiman and Nashwa Taher will be joined by 10 men in the Jeddah chamber and an-

other six people who will be appointed by the government.

"It's an achievement. Of course we would love more (women) but for a beginning it's an achievement," Taher said. Only 100 women voted in the election, compared to 4,000 men, Taher said, showing that she and Sulaiman had won strong support from male voters.

King Abdullah has made the promotion of women in society a priority for Saudi Arabia's economic development but emphasised that any steps will be in line with Islamic principles.

Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, follows the austere Wahhabi school of Sunni Islam. Women cannot drive,

must be covered up in public and should not mix with men outside their immediate family. "We did our best and showed the world and our society that we are ready to take responsibility," said Madawi al-Hassoun, a losing woman candidate.

All 12 victorious candidates were part of a joint platform called "For Jeddah", which pledged to support small businesses for men and women and make Jeddah more attractive to investors.

The Jeddah chamber already promotes women in business through its "Khadija Centre", named after the wife of Prophet Mohammad who was a successful businesswoman 14 centuries ago.



Lama Sulaiman in Jeddah. (AFP)

New Saudi monarch plans clean-up

Abdullah is ready to take on his country's corruption and subordination to U.S. interests.

Mark Hollingsworth

THE DEATH of King Fahd will be greeted with anxiety and unease by the West and the Saudi royal family now that Crown Prince Abdullah has succeeded the 84-year-old despot.

The House of Saud will be fearful because Abdullah has made little secret of the fact that he plans to cut back on royal corruption and the extravagant royal lifestyle. The White House and London will be nervous because the new king believes his country should be less subservient to Western military and strategic interests in the Gulf.

During his 23-year reign, King Fahd acquired a personal fortune of \$20 billion. He encouraged what the CIA called "a culture of royal excess" and Saudi princes brazenly cashed in on British and U.S. defence contracts.

But, unlike most senior princes, Abdullah is not corrupt. He has turned his back on the palatial luxuries of Riyadh and Jeddah. He has always been an aberration in the House of Saud. He represents the Bedouin, conservative, tribal interests in the kingdom. His rare concession to modernity is the bank of 33 television sets in his office, which allow him to monitor all available satellite channels at once.

Abdullah is determined to curb royal corruption, which escalated in the mid-1990s despite the kingdom running up multibillion-dollar deficits. He is also likely to be more non-aligned, reducing Saudi dependency on America in order to increase the prospects of peace in West Asia. For decades Saudi Arabia has been acquiescent in supporting U.S. strategic interests. The wars against Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 were launched from bases in the kingdom and the Gulf states, and were dependent on

cheap, plentiful oil and manipulating the price to benefit the American economy. Less than 24 hours after 9/11, the Saudis authorised a sharp increase in daily oil production. This kept the price low and helped to ensure that the U.S. experienced only a slight inflation increase.

Wielding its surplus oil capacity as a political weapon has given the Saudi royal family real power and influence over the West. In return, the U.S. and Britain protect the kingdom from Islamist insurgents and neighbouring states, sell it weapons at inflated prices purely to produce kickbacks for its senior princes, support its negotiations with the IMF and the World Bank, overlook its complicity in support for terrorism and turn a blind eye when British citizens are tortured in Saudi jails.

While it needs the oil revenues to fund the profligate lifestyles of its 6,000 princes, the House of Saud has been prepared to forgo much-needed profits in tight oil markets, coming close to bankrupting the country. And its subjugation to U.S. interests has increased support for Al-Qaeda and Islamist militancy, which has produced instability in West Asia and terrorism in western Europe.

Crown Prince Abdullah shows all the signs of being more independent, tougher and pragmatic. Politically, he is a traditional Islamic Arab nationalist. Among the Saudi public, he is popular and seen as straight-talking. He does not speak any foreign languages, preferring the traditional Bedouin style of Arabic, much to the annoyance of Prince Sultan, Defence Minister, who craves the patronage of Western governments.

While King Fahd remained alive, Abdullah was restricted in implementing reforms - reducing dependency on the U.S. for its security, stamping out royal greed, implementing the rule of law and curtailing the

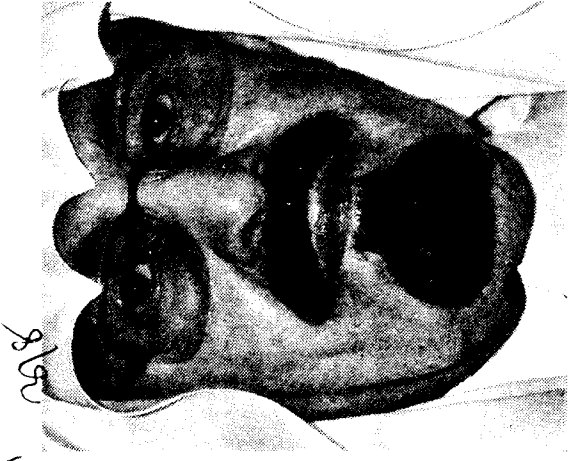
power of the militant Islamic clerics. He was often blocked by his reactionary half-brothers, Prince Sultan, Prince Naif (the Interior Minister) and Prince Salman (governor of Riyadh).

Now Abdullah should be unshackled and able to modernise a repressive and corrupt regime that has been propped up by the West. Some British and American diplomats claim that democracy is the solution to Saudi Arabia's problems. But the inconvenient consequence of an election might well be that Osama bin Laden would win. In 2001, a Saudi intelligence survey of educated, professional Saudis concluded that 95 per cent supported Al-Qaeda's cause. "If you go around the Muslim world, you will find the vast majority of people support Osama bin Laden and this is more tragic than 9/11 itself," said Ghazi al-Gosaibi, a former Saudi ambassador in London. "It comes down to the question of why people hate America."

Concessions, such as more consultative councils, may placate the kingdom's merchants. But the problem of Islamist terrorism and royal corruption can be rectified only by an independent judiciary and a return to the rule of law. That will involve tough and decisive leadership by Prince Abdullah rather than a tortuously slow road to political accountability.

There is now a rare opportunity to clean up a medieval monarchy that virtually runs the international oil economy, tortures Western and its own citizens at will, allows its religious elite to promote terrorism, and enables the U.S. to dominate West Asia.

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(Mark Hollingsworth is the co-author with Sandy Mitchell of *Saudi Babylon: Torture, Corruption and Cover-Up Inside the House of Saud* [Mainstream Publishing].)



Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah. - PHOTO: REUTERS

unencumbered use of Saudi airspace.

Access to Saudi bases was helpful but not essential. What was crucial was Saudi support for U.S. access to other Gulf bases. "After the 1991 Iraq war, none of the Gulf states were likely to do anything much with us militarily unless the Saudis wanted it to be done," said the former U.S. Undersecretary of Defence, Walter Slocombe. "So we needed Saudi political support."

The House of Saud has also not been shy at bankrolling U.S. foreign policy, notably \$32 million to the Contra rebels against the Nicaraguan government, \$4 billion for the mujahideen in Afghanistan in the 1980s and \$17 billion for the 1991 Gulf war.

And the biggest favour of all: supplying

AUG 2005

Abdullah formally takes over Saudi reins

Riyadh, August 1

CROWN PRINCE Abdullah, Saudi King Fahd's 81-year-old half brother and the country's de facto ruler since the king was incapacitated by a stroke in 1995, was appointed the new monarch after Fahd died early on Monday.

The new king announced that his half brother and the Saudi defence minister, Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz, 77, would be the nation's next crown prince. Prince Sultan is one of King Fahd's seven brothers, born of King Ibn Saud's favourite wife.

In his last years, Fahd was more of a figurehead — so he was sidelined as the close relationship he nurtured with the US deteriorated after the 9/11 attacks. It was Crown Prince Abdullah who oversaw the crack-

down on Islamic militants after followers of Saudi-born Osama bin Laden launched a wave of attacks, beginning with the May 2003 bombings of Western residential compounds in Riyadh.

Crown Prince Abdullah also pushed a campaign against extremist teaching and preaching and introduced the kingdom's first elections ever — municipal polls held in early 2005.

And Prince Abdullah — who before coming to power had not been happy with Saudi Arabia's close alliance with and military dependence on the US and also Washington's perceived bias toward Israel — rebuilt the kingdom's ties with the US. He visited President Bush twice at Bush's ranch at Crawford in Texas, most recently in April of this year.



King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz

OBITUARY | King Fahd (1918-2005)

SAUDI ARABIA'S King Fahd sought to modernise his desert kingdom while balancing change against tribal tradition and orthodox Islam, but a stroke a decade ago left him a ruler in name only. His death on Monday comes as the Saudi government pursues an aggressive clampdown on Islamic terrorism and unprecedented reforms. The portly, goateed Fahd inadvertently helped fuel the rise of Islamic extremism by making concessions to hard-liners in an effort to boost his Islamic credentials. But he also brought the kingdom closer to the US and agreed to a step that enraged many conservatives: the basing of US troops on Saudi soil after the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

In his last years, the sickly Fahd was mostly a figurehead as the close relationship he nurtured with the US deteriorated after the 9/11 terror attacks. Fifteen of the 19 hijackers were Saudis, and many in the US administration blamed the kingdom's strict Wahhabi school of Islam for fueling terrorism.

King Fahd, once a stickler who took a hand in the smallest details of government activities, stayed on the sidelines as the kingdom dealt with that crisis. Visitors who saw Fahd after his 1995 stroke reported he was barely aware of what was going on around him and could not recognise those who shook hands with him.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Fahd hailed as moderniser of desert kingdom

Monarch championed women's education

Douglas Martin

RIYADH: King Fahd, the absolutist monarch of Saudi Arabia who guided his desert kingdom through swerves in the oil market, regional wars and the incessant tensions between Islamic tradition and breakneck modernisation, died on Monday, the Saudi royal court in Riyadh said.

King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz, the fifth Saudi sovereign, transcended his early reputation as a *bon vivant* prince to become a leader of Arab states in the Persian Gulf region, a friend to the United States when that was not always easy and, most recently, though in a debilitated state due to repeated and deepening health problems, a principal in the war against terrorism.

King Fahd, who suffered the first of several strokes in 1995, was overweight, diabetic, and long suffered maladies from arthritis to gallbladder surgery to a blood clot in his eye. He used a cane or a wheelchair. He let hundreds of thousands of American troops be based in Saudi Arabia during the first war against Iraq despite heated criticism from other Arab countries.

Religious schools

His influence ranged from helping the Reagan administration orchestrate and finance its complicated, illegal operation to sell arms to Iran while aiding Nicaraguan rebels; to giving hundreds of millions of dollars to Palestinians fighting Israel, to

establishing religious schools, some of which have been described as breeders of terrorists, throughout the Islamic world.

The power and prestige of controlling the world's biggest pool of oil, a quarter of the planet's reserves, spoke for itself. But depressed petroleum prices during much of King Fahd's reign, which began in 1982, engendered economic pressures unthinkable during the high-flying 1970s. As population surged and employment opportunities dwindled, the kingdom's per capita income sank to a third of what it had been at the time of his coronation.

The King nonetheless used his ability to pump more oil almost at will as a damper on oil prices so as not to damage the world economy. But he understandably worried when prices fell too low to pay the kingdom's bills, and in 1986 sacked his famous Oil Minister, Ahmed Zaki Yamani, for allowing crude prices to fall to \$10 a barrel from \$30.

In 1986 King Fahd boldly declared his other source of power by naming himself Custodian of the Two Holy Places, referring to the Saudi cities of Mecca and Medina, Islam's most sacred sites. But it was exactly this religious role that was most challenged during the latter part of his reign as Islamic conservatives derided the royal family as corrupt and the Government's closeness to the United States as near-satanic.

It was thus of high significance that in December 2003, an

edict in King Fahd's name ordered religious scholars to marshal doctrinal arguments to fight Islamist terrorists.

Action against Osama

In 1994, the King stripped Osama bin Laden of his Saudi citizenship because of his activities against the royal family. The King's other anti-terrorist actions, many probably performed by Crown Prince Abdullah, included removing more than 2,000 radical preachers from their mosques.

Other than the principality of Lichtenstein, Saudi Arabia is the only country named after a family. King Fahd's Saud family has ruled since 1932 when his father, King Abdul Aziz al-Saud, formed what was actually the family's third kingdom on the Arabian peninsula.

Each time, beginning in the mid-18th century, the Saudis claimed religious authority as legitimacy for their rule. This derived from their alliance with the Wahabbi sect of Muslims, led by the Al-Sheikh family. In return for the endorsement of the ultra-strict Wahabbis, the Saudis act as their protectors and enforcers.

Dr. Rashad Pharaon, once personal physician to Saud, compared Fahd to his brothers, saying he came "nearest to his father in outlook and general qualities wisdom, ambition and the will-power to achieve those objectives for which the Saudi house stands." —New York Times News Service

Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques

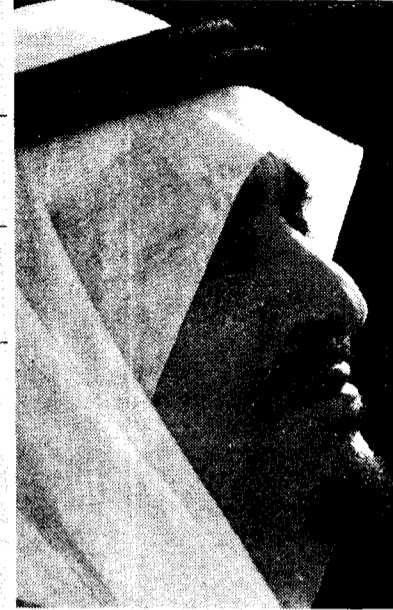
King Fahd, known as the *Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques* was one of around 48 sons of King Abdul Aziz, founder of modern Saudi Arabia. Under his rule the Kingdom has had to absorb the huge cost of the 1990 Gulf War, the impact of falling oil prices and the rise of extremism

1923: Fahd Bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud born in Riyadh

1932: Desert state Kingdom founded - and oil discovered

1950s-60s: Gains reputation as a bon vivant

1953: Becomes nation's first Minister of Education. Expands school system from 30,000 students to over 3.2m. Builds seven universities



June 13, 1982: Crown Prince Fahd succeeds Khalid as fifth King of Saudi Arabia

1986: Takes title *Khadm al-Haramayn al-Sharifayn* - Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques - to indicate his protection of the sacred sites at Mecca and Medina

1990: Iraq invades neighbouring Kuwait. King Fahd invites U.S.-led forces temporarily onto Saudi soil

1962: Appointed Minister of the Interior

1967: Becomes Second Deputy Prime Minister. Arab sentiment against U.S. support for Israel during *Six-Day War* spills over into criticism of ruling family

1970s: Oil boom - as home to world's greatest oil reserves petro-dollars flood in. Future king amasses personal fortune estimated at \$18 billion

1973-1974: Oil embargo against nations that support Israel during *Arab-Israeli War* triggers crisis in U.S.-Saudi relations

Mar 1975: Becomes Crown Prince when his brother *Khalid Bin Abdul Aziz* is proclaimed King

1979: Revolution in Iran leads to fears of Islamic upheaval spreading to Saudi Arabia. King Fahd supports Baghdad in Iraq's war with Iran

1981: Proposes peace plan to seek end to Arab-Israeli conflict. Plan becomes basis of *Faz Declaration*

1990s: After *Gulf War* American forces do not leave, stirring up widespread popular resentment against United States. Estimated \$60 billion cost of Gulf War to Saudi Arabia forces ailing monarch to introduce unpopular austerity measures

1995: King Fahd suffers a stroke - cedes much of his power to his half-brother, *Crown Prince Abdullah*

1996: Bomb attack on U.S. desert headquarters at Dhahran kills 19 service members

2001: Revelation that 15 of 19 terrorists in 9/11 attacks were Saudi nationals deals sledgehammer blow to U.S.-Saudi relations. Saudi government severs diplomatic relations with Taliban regime in Afghanistan

2003: Saudi government refuses to participate in U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. U.S. finally pulls troops out of Kingdom

Aug 1, 2005: King Fahd dies. Crown Prince Abdullah succeeds as monarch

Picture: Associated Press

© GRAPHIC NEWS

US-Saudi rift over jailed activists

It's Not Democratic: Rice. Mind Your Own Business: The Reply

Riyadh: US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice criticised Saudi Arabia's record on democratic reform and the jailing of three activists but was firmly rebuffed on Tuesday by America's staunch Middle East ally.

"The row is really meaningless," Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal told a post-midnight (early Tuesday) news conference after Rice conferred with him and the country's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz. "The assessment that is important for any country in the development of its political reform is the judgment of its own people," Prince Saud said. "And that is, in the final analysis, the criteria that we follow."

Rice flew into Riyadh on the fourth leg of a regional swing after delivering a major speech in Cairo calling for sweeping democratic change and naming Saudi Arabia as one of the states lagging. Addressing 600 Egyptian officials, scholars and students at Cairo's American University, she praised the "brave citizens" in Saudi Arabia who are "demanding accountable government". "Some first steps toward openness have

She was referring to three activists sentenced to between six and nine years in prison in May on charges of demanding a constitutional monarch in the ultra-conservative Gulf sheikhdom. Ali al-Demaini, Abdullah al-Hamed and Matruk al-Faleh were found guilty of "using Western terminology" in formulating their demands. They also allegedly questioned the King's role as head of the judiciary. The three planned to appeal their case on Tuesday.

The US state department had registered concern over the fate of the activists and Rice said she raised the matter in her talks late on Monday with the Saudi leadership. "We will continue to follow the progress of this case, we think it is an important case," she said. "The petitioning of the government for reform should not be a crime."

But Prince Saud said he told Rice the prisoners had broken a law. "They are in the hands of the court. The government cannot interfere until the court action is taken in this regard." Asked about Rice's speech in Cairo, the prince said, "I'm afraid I haven't read it, to my eternal shame." AFP



Rice greets Prince Saud al-Faisal at the Riyadh air base

been taken with recent municipal elections," Rice said. "Yet many people still pay an unfair price for exercising their basic rights. Three individuals in particular are currently imprisoned for peacefully petitioning their government—and this should not be a crime in any country."

The question of Arab unity and reform?

Hamid Ansari

“ARISE, YE Arabs, and awake!” was the seditious 19th century slogan of Arab nationalism in its infancy. It aroused them against the Ottoman rule but did not hinder the subsequent imperial designs of Britain and France. The moment of liberation became the start of newer forms of dominance.

In an essay written in 1958 an eminent Western scholar had posed three possible options for the Arabs in their encounter with the West: submit, turn their backs, or meet on terms of equal cooperation after renewing their society from within. A prerequisite for the latter, he added, is “the removal of the irritant of foreign interference.” That interference persists and the Arab world today, in the words of a careful observer, “is decimated and divided, bereft of all nationalist pride, lacking any solidarity or self confidence, more subject to foreign domination than at any time since the Second World War, and at war with its own angry citizens.”

The Algiers Summit of the Arab League provided ample evidence of the limitations of the Arab state system. The external factor is one aspect of it; another, more intrinsic, reason lies in a web of socio-political sins of omission and commission.

Decades back the Syrian historian Constantin Zorayak had observed that the failure to understand catastrophes is even deadlier to a people than the catastrophes themselves. The failure to comprehend is thus central to the crises that have afflicted the region.

The stated purpose of the Arab League is to strengthen relations between member states, achieve cooperation through coordination of policies, and safeguard the independence and

The challenge to the Arab citizen is manifold. Domestically, neo-patriarchy and authoritarianism has to make way for participatory governance. Regionally, the being and becoming of Arabness has to be clearly demarcated.

sovereignty of its members. It has failed on each of these counts. Disunity characterises its functioning in times normal and stressful. Its failure is that of its members. They lack the political will and for six decades have not been to develop a unity of purpose and convergence of interests. Intoxicating rhetoric of Arab unity has enhanced manifold the impact of this failure. Is there a case for re-statement of purpose and procedure?

Role of elites

Philosophers caution against systematically misleading expressions and lawyers endeavour to benefit from loosely worded formulations of intent. Two generations of elites in Arab lands have been guilty of both. The issue, as the Moroccan historian Abdullah Al Arawi put it, is not about the intrinsic value of their vision of Arab history but about the real relationships obtaining in the world today. The focus, he said, should be on the social matrix of tradition, on the distinction between tradition as structure and tradition as value.

Did the elites perceive this and translate it into practice? What was the precise import in

their minds of frequently used expressions such as freedom, liberty, legitimacy, tyranny, revolution? Were elite perceptions altogether autonomous? What role did external interests play in shaping and sustaining them?

The geopolitical centrality and economic indispensability of West Asian lands is the curse of modern times, even if one result of it is unparalleled economic prosperity. The curse translated itself into an “infra historical rhythm” that retarded normal evolution; this, in turn, benefited both the elites and the principal external beneficiaries of that rhythm. The Arab nationalists lost their way in a maze of ideological confusion and oppressive state structures. The neo-patriarchal Arab Right became integral to the quest for stability and was viewed as an ally in local, regional and global terms. Its religious identity was an added asset in the fight against godless enemies.

Prior to 9/11, the preference was for moderate Muslims; thereafter, for moderate and modern ones. In the process the Arab (and the Muslim) became synonymous with the actual or alleged

failures of these elites. Thus were laid the foundations for implementing the doctrine of the “Clean Break.” Simplistic prescriptions, however, do not work and Iraq shows that the best laid plans can go awry.

Some questions beg for an answer. What is the seriousness of the domestic effort for change? Three Arab Human Development Reports of the UNDP have analysed the shortcomings in the shape of “three deficits” – knowledge, freedom and gender. Another report on Arab Competitiveness, produced recently by the Davos Economic Forum, puts the focus on population growth and high levels of youth unemployment and has urged a shift away from total dependence on a rentier economy. Sheer necessity would propel movement towards some correctives; it would be slow, even erratic and would seek not to disturb the locus of political and economic power.

Machiavelli’s dictum that “men forget more easily the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony” would hold good. The correctives therefore will lead to a measure of sharing, but will not involve meaningful transfer of political authority or economic power and decision-making.

Is the purpose of the external impulse altruistic? In a process that is essentially elite-centric, they have been told that the “rules of the game have been changed” and they therefore have to comply. The elites would comply where they must; they would also be artful dodgers.

In the process, and conveniently, less attention is paid to the other assertion of the AHDR 2005 that “the continued occupation of the Palestinian territories by Israel, the US-led occupation of Iraq and the escalation of terrorism” had an adverse impact on human development. (This and a few other sentences in a 250-page volume incurred the wrath of the U.S. Government, led to a cut in funding, and compelled the Administrator of the UNDP to dissociate the UN and the UNDP from these judgments).

The Arab Street does exist and so does the citizen with an acute sense of dignity and with concentric circles of identity. He is aware of the interplay of the internal and external factors, and of the motives for emphasising one and underplaying the other. He knows that participatory governance without the power of the purse and the rule of law is an empty slogan, as is democracy without sovereignty. The challenge to the Arab citizen, therefore, is manifold. Domestically, neo-patriarchy and authoritarianism has to make way for participatory governance. Its pace and content would be determined by each civil society autonomously. It has to be meaningful but cannot be prescriptive. Regionally, the being and becoming of Arabness has to be clearly demarcated and the overarching Arab identity (“all those whose manners and traditions have been shaped in an Arab mould, and whose mother tongue is Arabic”) is to be sustained for its cultural richness but without the unsustainable political baggage of the past six decades.

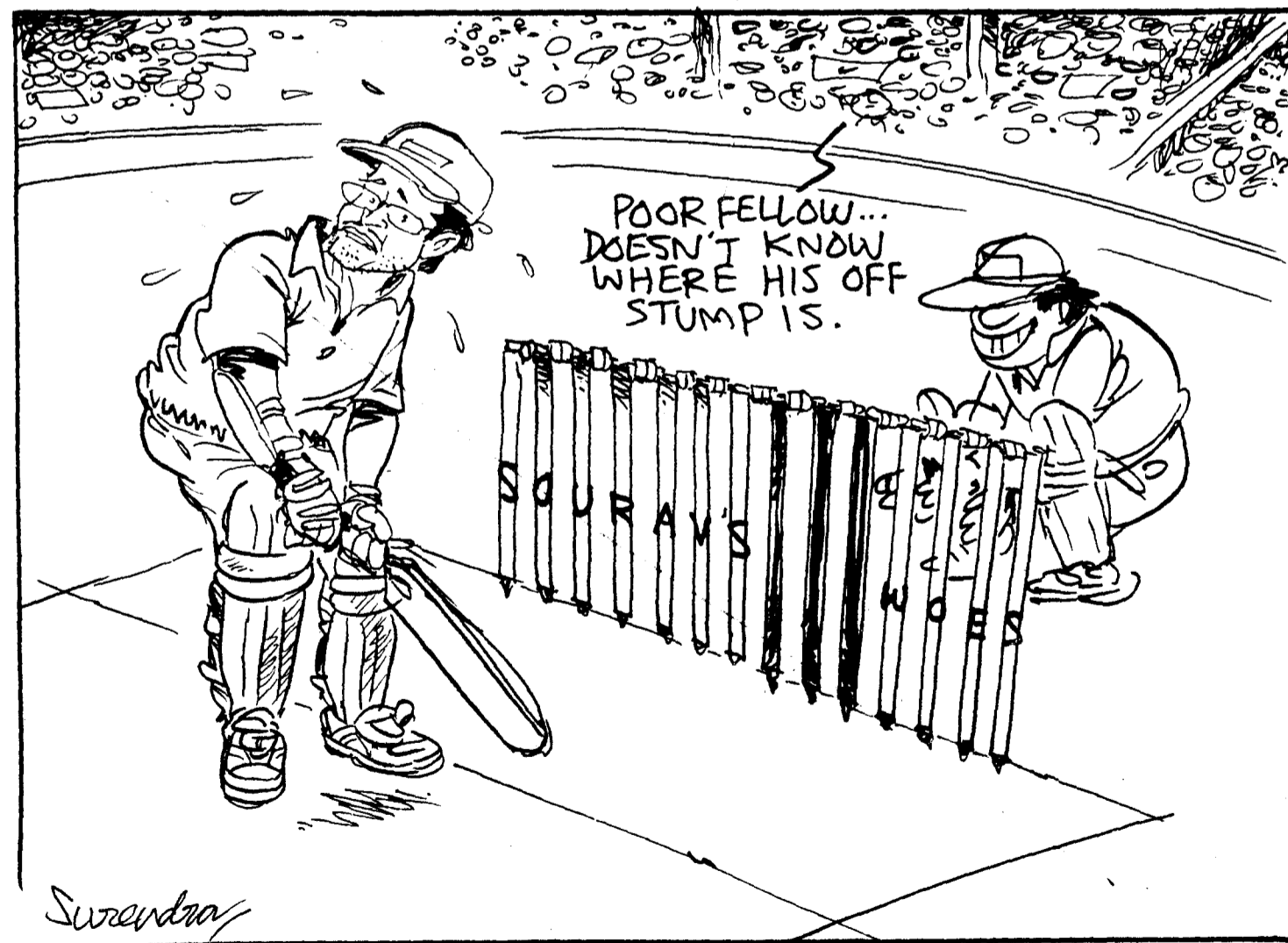
The choices

New regional or sub-regional entities, based on identified community of economic interests, could be one alternative. The Palestinian cause is an international one and not merely Arab or Muslim. Internationally, the urge to create fortresses, outposts, protectorates, captive sources of strategic material, and markets has to make way for an equitable system of international relations and trade and cooperative rather than competitive security arrangements.

In each category the challenge is of confronting the entrenched power, and the resulting power equations. Given the inter-linkages, none can be addressed in isolation nor can cosmetic arrangements be enduring.

(M.H. Ansari is a Distinguished Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi.)

SURENDRA



11/01/05

ARABS AND DEMOCRACY

Adnan

THERE IS MUCH talk of a new democratic awakening in the Arab world after the elections in Iraq. Those who think in this vein assert that several recent developments prove the proposition that the desire for a liberal political order is spreading in West Asia and North Africa. The relevant highlights are street demonstrations in Beirut, agitation by the democratic opposition in Egypt, local body polls in Saudi Arabia, and Mahmoud Abbas' assumption of the presidency of the Palestinian Authority through a smooth electoral process. These events did take place after the Iraqis voted for a new parliament on January 30. However, no causal connection can be proposed with any credibility. The Lebanese demonstrations were sparked off by the assassination of a popular politician while the Palestinian election became mandatory following the death of Chairman Yasser Arafat. In any event, the Lebanese and Palestinians tried to build democratic traditions long before the Iraqis embarked on this endeavour under extremely distorted circumstances imposed by an illegal and outrageous occupation. Virtually none of the authoritarian leaders of the Arab world appears ready to concede a need to change methods of governance.

The Iraqi election seems to have generated a measure of excitement in West Asia and North Africa. However, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's response to the situation provides an indication of the real strength of the liberal wave supposedly sweeping across the Arab world. The pressure that western democracies were exerting on the Egyptian President to undertake political reforms increased significantly after the Iraqi election. Mr. Mubarak's domestic opponents apparently believed that the circumstances were propitious for them to press for a change in the political order. He responded to these twin pressures by changing the

electoral law so marginally that the one party rule in existence for the past few decades is unlikely to be disturbed. While the candidates of other parties can contest the presidential election to be held this summer, every nomination needs to be endorsed by a few hundred officials. Given the grip Mr. Mubarak's party has on Egyptian officialdom, real opponents of the regime have little reason to believe their names will figure on the ballot papers.

Much of the hype about the spread of democracy in the Arab world has been created by a United States administration that is intent on manufacturing a 'noble' purpose for its foreign policy. This posture suffers from a huge credibility gap given the history of American backing for authoritarian and, in some cases, obscurantist regimes in Arab countries from Morocco to Egypt. Washington's new-found interest in spreading democracy might actually prove to be a kiss of death for the movements that have been pressing for political reform. Most of them draw inspiration from either religion or a spirit of nationalism. Typically, they have thrived on anti-Americanism. The leaders of these movements could lose popular support if their adherents came to believe they were now relying on Washington's support. Such a situation will be tailor-made for authoritarian rulers to strike back in the guise of stauncher nationalists. While Arab societies do need to democratise, only untainted grassroots movements can produce such an outcome. Meanwhile, *The Dream Palace of the Arabs*, Fouad Ajami's elegiac account of the collision between the modernist, secular, democratic impulse on the one hand and theocratic politics and authoritarianism on the other suggests what might have been — and what may yet become reality if the inspiring example of, say, a Naguib Mahfuz is followed across the Arab world.

Saudi men vote in landmark election

By Dominic Evans

11/2 11-19 Arab world
Riyadh: Saudi men voted in a municipal election in the capital Riyadh on Thursday, the first stage in an unprecedented nationwide vote as the absolute monarchy inches toward reform. "It took a long time to get here but we've broken through a psychological barrier, that we couldn't deal with ballot boxes," said university professor Sulaiman Enezi, who raised his arms in triumph after casting his vote.

The polls, from which women are excluded, are part of a cautious programme of reform introduced by de facto ruler Crown Prince Abdullah. He has faced growing calls for change at home and from Saudi Arabia's main ally, the US.

Critics say the elections are largely a cosmetic response in

which few are taking part. But diplomats say the vote does at least create a mechanism for Saudis to channel concerns.

Voters are deciding just half the members of municipi-

WOMEN BARRED: "An all-male election is a lopsided one. When you exclude 50% of the society and allow criminal prisoners to vote this is an insult to 9 million women," historian and women's campaigner Hatoon Fassi said.

pal councils, whose powers are likely to be limited. The other council members will be appointed. Women cannot vote and few men registered in the Riyadh area—just 149,000 in a city of over four million people—reflecting scepticism that the councils will make much difference to daily life. Agencies

Riyadh calls for global centre to fight terror

has from
RIYADH, FEB. 5. Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince called on Saturday for countries worldwide to create an international anti-terrorism centre for quick information-sharing, as he opened a conference on ways to fight the Al-Qaeda and other terror groups.

Crown Prince Abdullah, the de facto leader of a country struggling to contain terrorist attacks, said such an international centre could allow officials and experts from countries worldwide to "exchange information instantly in response to the demands of the situation and the need to prevent incidents, God willing, before they occur."

The Crown Prince also told delegates the world cannot fight terrorism unless it fights three other global crimes linked to it — arms smuggling, drug smuggling and money laundering.

Saudi Arabia is already thought to exchange information with the United States. But the Kingdom has been blamed by some in the West for exporting terrorism, and failing to openly disclose the steps it takes internally to fight terrorists.

Aggressive campaign

The Counter-Terrorism International Conference caps an aggressive anti-terror campaign by Saudi authorities to uproot

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the Al-Qaeda's structure in the kingdom, one responsible for the deaths of scores of civilians in bombings, shootings and kidnappings.

Prince Abdullah told delegates from the United States, Britain and more than 50 countries in an enormous palace conference hall that Saudi Arabia has fought terrorism "vigorously on the local, regional and international levels. ... We will continue to do so until we eliminate, with the help of God, this evil."

"Wise and timely"

Amr Moussa, head of the Arab League who was at the conference, described Prince Abdullah's proposal for the centre as "wise and timely" and said the league was "willing to participate in establishing this centre and running it."

But experts say that while the conference provides symbolic evidence of Saudi progress in the fight against terror, the kingdom's biggest problem is making the rest of the world believe its efforts are genuine.

"When they speak about internal security nobody believes them," said Kevin Rosser, an analyst with the London-based Control Risks Group.

"Even when they have made genuine progress it's taken a long time for the outside world's recognition to catch up." — AP

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