STABLE AUTOCRACY IN SAUDI ARABIA: THE FAILURE OF ARAB SPRING DEMOCRATISATION

Adhi C. Fahadayna
Department of Politics, Government, and International Relations, Universitas Brawijaya,
a.fahadayna@ub.ac.id
This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. I would also like to thank our research assistants, Alvinda, Tiffany, Muti, Fikri, Afiv, Nurvina, Damanhuri, Bidriyah, and Fahmi, for helping me to construct this article.
STABLE AUTOCRACY IN SAUDI ARABIA: THE FAILURE OF ARAB SPRING DEMOCRATISATION

Adhi Cahya Fahadayna
Universitas Brawijaya

Email: a.fahadayna@ub.ac.id
Submitted: 7 October 2023; Accepted: 10 July 2024

ABSTRACT

Saudi Arabia maintains a stable autocracy as the fundamental politics of the state and government system. Saudi Arabia has high petroleum reserves and has always been considered a close ally of the United States. Historically, Saudi Arabia has also been known as the centre of Islamic civilisation and the Islamic religion. As the wave of democratisation in the Middle East strengthened, Saudi Arabia preserved the autocratic government style as the state’s central source of political and economic stability, which cannot be separated from Islam as the source of stable autocracy. By configuring its political power to the Ibn Saud Family and Al ash-Sheikh Family, the stability to preserve autocracy is undeniably robust and unchanging. The development of democratic institutions and reformation of religious education was effectively hindered by enforcing Islamic law through various law enforcement agencies controlled by the monarch. The significant impact of social media during the Arab Spring did not have substantial implications for the democratisation process. This research will use historical analysis to unpack the source of stable autocracy in Saudi Arabia by using the monarch’s domination toward religion, politics, and law as the bargaining power of stability resources for hindering West democratisation.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Stable Autocracy, Monarchy, Wahhabism, Arab Spring
**INTRODUCTION**

In September 1932, Abdul Aziz ibn Abdurrahman al-Saud, known as King Ibn Saud, proclaimed the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Kostiner, 1993). The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was the ramification of the unification of two kingdoms in the Arabic Peninsula. The Kingdom of Najd and Hejaz were unified by the leader who had successfully survived the exile in Kuwait. As the oldest inheritance of the Ibn Saud family, King Abdul Aziz quickly consolidated his influence and built trust among Arabic tribes (Bray & Darlow, 2012). More importantly, he also succeeded in gaining the loyalty of the leader of Wahhabists, Abdullah ibn Abd al-Latif Al ash-Sheikh, who made the possibilities of a strong pact between the most influential clans in the Arabic peninsula, which are the Ibn Saud family and the Al ash-Sheikh family.

The democratic peace theory indulged the stability of autocratic regimes based on the propensity of autocrats to engage in conflicts (Rosato, 2005; Russett et al., 1995). It is essential to understand how the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia sustains its autocratic rule while maintaining its relationship with the West as one of its significant allies (Hayes, 2012). Interestingly, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia managed to preserve its autocratic stability during the intense wave of democratisation witnessed during the Arab Spring. Analysing the sources of stability within autocratic regimes amidst a robust regional democratisation movement is crucial.

In the future development of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the relationship between the Ibn Saud family and the Al ash-Sheikh family is embodied throughout the political and religious entities. As the country leader who needed absolute legitimation over other tribes in the Arabic peninsula, the Ibn Saud family positioned the Al ash-Sheikh family as the head of religious authority (Commins, 2005). Through the robust relationship with the Al ash-Sheikh family, the Ibn Saud family could effortlessly get legitimation from the religious law and other kinds of regulations that make the political authority of the Ibn Saud family unable to be contested by different tribes.

Since the pact between Ibn Saud and the Al ash-Sheikh family was established, Ibn Saud became the first King of Saudi, and Abdullah ibn Abd al-Latif Al ash-Sheikh became the leader of the Saudi religious establishment, the forerunner of the Religious Council in Saudi Arabia (Kostiner, 1993). The Al ash-Sheikh family controls the religious authority that deals with fundamental law, religious law, law enforcement, morals, and ethics. This Council also became the most prestigious committee that could have significant political influence by recommending a successor to the Saudi monarch.
Religious fundamentalism and stable autocracy were preserved through the Al ash-Sheikh family, the descendants of Sheikh Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism. Al ash-Sheikh family is the second most prominent family in Saudi, which leads Wahhabism and decides the religious policymaking of the most significant country for Islamic communities worldwide (Commins, 2005). Concisely, Wahhabism was a religious movement led by Sheikh Mohammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792) that originated in Saudi Arabia (Alrebh, 2021). This traditional form of theocracy believes that opposing and disobeying the government is considered a sin and, therefore, rejects any challenge, secularism, and other “true” Islam. The movement was initiated by Sheikh Mohammed ibn Abdul-Wahhab, a staunch believer in the teaching of Ibn Taymiya, following the Hanbali school of jurisprudence. The pact between Al Saud and Abd al-Wahhab was created to design modern Saudi in which the Al Saud family holds the political authority, and, in return, Al ash-Sheikh holds religious authority that legitimises and supports the political authority of the Al Saud family. The Al Saud family concluded the pact by exchanging authority to propagate and uphold the country’s Wahhabism doctrine.

The Council of Islamic Scholars or Permanent Committee is the only institution with the authority to discuss all the religious issues and policymaking, unquestionably the institutions led by the Al ash-Sheikh family and nominated by the monarch to issue a fatwa (religious ruling) and establish stability for securing the monarchy's authority. The Permanent Council is also affiliated with the Council of Senior Scholars, which is designed to become the Council that essentially oversees religious aspects, especially fiqh and religious jurisprudence. However, the Permanent Committee has more authority, especially in implementing and enforcing religious rulings as law (Kostiner, 1993). The extent to which the role of the permanent committee was the closer relation with the royal family and obligation to support the monarchy toward the religious institution. With the contestation toward stable autocracy in Saudi, democratisation has also risen tremendously recently (Gause III, 2011). The Kingdom of Saudi depends upon the influence of religion and Wahhabism to preserve political power. Since Wahhabism adheres to the Caliph-Dynasty model, where the people are obligated fully to obey the wali or religious leader, the political power is entirely on the kingdom, and people are given no space to conduct any reform. This situation is based on the Basic Law of Governance, Umm al-Qura Gazette no. 3397, the Year 1992 Articles 6 and 7, which state...
that the government’s authority is derived from the religious basis (Quran and Sunnah). Thus, citizens should fully obey the King.

Therefore, the governance of the Saudi Kingdom has a deep-rooted Islamic value that shapes its deterrence response to external changes. Even though the democratisation process is developing in Saudi, the Kingdom has a stringent rule that justifies the oppression of its citizens from the religion (Lacroix & Stéphane, 2011). Throughout the years of protests, the movement's demands were mainly to end repression, defend all political prisoners' rights, and call for constitutional monarchy (Menoret, 2016). With the robust impact of Islam on Saudi people and politics, stable autocracy still could be conserved. Capital punishment and qisas are the enforcement methods that are extremely useful in hindering democratisation in Saudi. Amid the unfair trial and lack of understanding of human rights, the Saudi government has extensive authority to preserve stable autocracy and eliminate an enemy of the state by enforcing the (Lacroix & Stéphane, 2014). A citizen could be punished by death if loyalty and activism threaten the sustainability of a stable autocracy.

With the strong influence of Wahhabism, religious radicalism and fundamentalism have become more definite time by time. Moreover, when an investigation showed that most terrorists involved in 9/11 came from Saudi. Saudi Arabia has been facing severe accusations as the supporter and centre of terrorism (Bradley, 2015). This accusation became more potent when the leading actor who claimed responsibility was Osama bin Laden, who was one of the innermost of the Saudi royal family. The relationship between Wahhabism and Al Qaeda is manifested through the religious conformity of Al Qaeda toward the puritanism of Islam through return to the Sunnah since Shaikh Abdul Wahhab calls for puritanical Islamic reforms through the war when Muslims refuse to follow the old way of Sunnah (Choksy & Choksy, 2015). The jihadi movement shares identical methods and makes close connections to the Wahhabist Shaikh teachings and methods undertaken by Al Qaeda. The occurrence of Wahhabist relations with Islamic terrorism has made the distance between a religious institution and a political institution (Commins, 2005).

Unsympathetically, international communities, especially the US, suspect the Wahhabist Sheikhs have been involved in the radicalisation process and put more pressure on the monarchs (Choksy & Choksy, 2015). Eventually, the monarchies and the fundamentalism within Wahhabism clergies caused public distrust and controversies. The public inquiries demanded a review of such Wahhabist teachings (Choksy & Choksy,
The latest development in the relationship between religion and politics was, first, the preventive measure to review the teachings of Shaikh; second, the tightening of regulation for issuing religious laws or fatwa; and third, installing a contract system toward Shaikh that worked for the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Religious Ruling (Mabon, 2012). It was decreed by the late King Abdullah Al Saud in 2010. These regulations were strong indicators that the monarch responded to pressure from international communities and Saudi societies for the democratisation process in Saudi and reduced the stable autocracy of the religious authority in Saudi.

Represented by the Wahhabism led by the Al ash-Sheikh family, Islam has continually preached and spread Islamic fundamentalism and conservatism that will thrive the power of the absolute monarch (Commins, 2005). Moreover, with the collaboration between Ibn Saud and the Al ash-Sheikh family, the title of the reigning monarch changed during the leadership of King Fahd ibn Abdul Aziz to Custodian of Two Holy Mosques, known as Al Haramayn. Saladin used the title of Al Haramayn after the conquest of Jerusalem in the third Crusades (Commins, 2005). Al Haramayn was also used by the Ottoman Sultan Selim the First after his successful invasion to capture Medina and Mecca from the Sultanate Mamluks of Egypt in 1517 (Commins, 2005).

The concept of Al Haramayn is the official position of the Al Saud family in religious institutions. The Al Ash-Sheik family exclusively granted the emergence of the concept to the Al Saud family to have more influence in the religious institutions (Alrebh, 2021). Consequently, utilising the Al Haramyn concept was crucial to creating a legitimation for stable autocracy that the Saudi royal family implemented. Through this concept, the Al Saud family put distinction over all the members of the family, giving inheritance rights, which leads to an idiosyncrasy in Saudi social life as the family members of the Al Haramayn, princes, and princesses of Saudi royal family have enormous political, economic, and social luxury rights. By monopolising and dominating all aspects of Saudi Arabia, from politics to society, stable autocracy could be preserved for extended periods and maintain political stability more efficiently than any country in the Middle East.

**ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

Democracy is rooted in the fundamental element of liberalism as a political philosophy. Liberalism is a progressive political philosophy promoting freedom, civil liberty, and democracy (Widjajanto, 2017). The development of democracy worldwide does not
necessarily conclude that autocrats fully diminish in political leadership (Tusalem, 2015). The theoretical foundation of stable autocracy is derived from the realisation that autocrats are developing their capability to consolidate power and joining democratic contestation to consolidate their power in a very democratic procedure (Mirić & Pechenkina, 2023). Recent studies about the development of modern democracy indicated that the effort to weaken democratic stability is to destroy the democratic foundation from the inside (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). It is coherent with the recent studies about the innovation approach that the authoritarian government implemented to put more pressure on political opposition and limit the democratic space through citizens (Mietzner, 2020).

Stable autocracy is putting effort into constraining any revolution, especially utilising economic liberalisation to make revolution less attractive to citizens (Mirić & Pechenkina, 2023). Stable autocracies have a unique core: creating a financial system that could accumulate effective tax transfers to citizens (Pond, 2018). The strategies to distribute such illicit welfare to citizens are closely connected with the domestic economy, which must be resourceful enough to distribute adequate welfare across the country. The domestic economy of the stable autocratic country is also associated with the effect of the international economy that brings the foundational aspect of democratisation. In correlation with the global economy, a country with a resourceful economy tends to implement liberalisation economics, which creates the possibilities of democratisation. However, the stable autocratic country is developing a system that could avoid any democratisation effort by limiting citizen’s freedom to maintain political influence in exchange for the welfare provided by tax transfer (Tusalem, 2015).

The stable autocracy in Saudi Arabia is the most advanced development, combining the classic approach of sustaining autocracy through economic policy and implementing religious law to suppress the possibility of revolution and even democratic consolidation among Saudi citizens (Gerschewski, 2015). The advanced stable autocracy is implemented domestically and enforced with economic policy that makes citizens dependent on the policy that led the authorities of the monarch to become absolute. In addition, the Saudi government increased its political bargain by securing the oil industry export to its closest ally, which also created international leverage and hindered any external mobilisation for revolution or democratisation (Gerschewski, 2015). Therefore, international pressure will be minimal because Saudi Arabia employs oil exports to resist democratisation. The stable autocracy in Saudi is also immune from the recent revolution effort that uses social media for media consolidation (Abramson & Rivera, 2016). With
comprehensive and integrated authoritarian innovation by limiting citizens’ freedom in exchange for the distribution of wealth, the Saudi government successfully halted the Arab Spring revolution effort.

In exploring the foundations of stability within Saudi Arabian autocratic regimes, one finds that the democratic peace theory falls short of adequately explicating such phenomena. Nonetheless, an observable inclination toward democratic governance exists within Asia, particularly in East and South Asian contexts (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Gerschewski, 2015). Therein, democratic regimes often evolve into hybrid forms; in less favourable scenarios, governments adopt a compromised variant of democracy, commonly referred to as illiberal democracy. This emergence of hybrid and defective democratic structures is intimately associated with the strategic innovations enacted by autocratic leaders (Mietzner, 2020). In contemporary settings, autocrats may sanction limited democratic practices, including elections and expressions of freedom, albeit paired with extensive strategies of co-optation and suppression aimed at curtailing the institutionalisation of democracy and hindering democratic movements. Within Saudi Arabia, the innovative tactics of autocratic governance centre on controlling three key areas to restrict democratisation efforts and ensure the stability of the regime: monopolising religious institutions as the exclusive judicial authority of the state, impeding educational reforms to suppress democratic consciousness among the populace, and orchestrating selective welfare distributions to sustain economic stability (Mirić & Pechenkina, 2023; Pond, 2018; Tusalem, 2015).

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses the historical approach of tracing state ideology and religious institutions to unpack the source of stable autocracy in Saudi Arabia (Collier, 2011). The process tracing method in the historical approach is divided into four parts: (a) incorporate the previous research by other scholars, (b) as a critical approach for the development of institutions and ideology, (c) deduct significant variables in the case study, and (d) to find critical juncture through causality between variable and the case (Mahoney & Terrie, 2008). This research examines the source of stable autocracy that is rooted institutionally and ideologically. The process tracing also used secondary statistical data to unpack influential cases toward stable autocracy in Saudi Arabia (Gerring, 2008).

Moreover, the historical approach was implemented to unpack any deviant case toward the possibility of democratisation in Saudi Arabia. Tracking democratisation
initiatives in Saudi Arabia is crucial in measuring the probability of deviant cases toward stable autocracy in Saudi Arabia. The deviance case will determine the possibility of false assumptions toward stable autocracy in Saudi Arabia (Mahoney, 2015). Through process tracking analysis, this paper identifies and explains the causes of stagnation in the development of democratic institutions in Saudi Arabia. Finally, process tracking establishes a causal relationship between religious institutions and stable autocracy in Saudi Arabia.

**DISCUSSION**

**The Search of Stability in Saudi: Early Activism and Economic Development**

The early activism movement in Saudi started in early 1998 when several activists reformulated its calling through democratic credo to criticise the true calling of Wahhabism religious orthodoxy (Lacroix & Stephane, 2004). The early movement was initiated by various intellectual and religious leaders who belonged to non-Sunni Islamists; most were part of liberals Shi’ites—the trends to criticise and create opposition factions that consistently became the staunch opposition of Saudi religious authority. The early activism successfully created a platform for civil resistance because of the novelty of its credo of accommodating differences in religious, political, and generational gaps within societies. The platform is currently expanding and consolidating stronger. This movement claimed several names such as wasatiyyun (advocates of moderation), tanwiriyyun (enlighteners), or even aqlaniyyun (rationalists); most of them agree on defining themselves as islahiyyun (reformists) (Lacroix & Stephane, 2004). The 2003 Jeddah protest is the ramification of earlier activism by liberal Islamists that called for democracy in Saudi Arabia. They presented their manifesto and petitions to Crown Prince Abdullah Al Saud in 2003 and demanded progressive actions taken by the Crown Prince, which eventually led to a national dialogue conference and partial municipal elections (Seznec, 2002; Lacroix & Stephane, 2004).

Providentially, a brilliant and moderate monarch reigned in Saudi at that time. Since becoming the Crown Prince in 1982, King Abdullah Al Saud has dedicated his position to consolidating marginalised groups within Saudi Royal families and managed to reform the Saudi National Guard. As Crown Prince, he also has strong relations with modernists and intellectuals who are discussing the future of modern Saudi, which gives him closer ties with Saudi intellectuals and reformists (Seznec, 2002). In 2003, significant protesters among Saudi intellectuals and reformists were accommodated by Crown Prince
Abdullah Al Saud to deliver the aspiration for Saudi reformation and modernisation (Lacroix & Stephane, 2004).

Conversely, King Abdullah Al Saud was not among the most prestigious princes; the most prestigious clan of the Saudi princes is often known as the Sudairy Seven, consisting of members of the royal family who currently rule Saudi (Yamani, 2009). King Abdullah Al Saud entered the throne through building reform within monarch institutions and the Saudi National Guard. King Abdullah Al Saud reigned with the spirit of modernisation and moderation in response to political instability in the Middle East caused by severe security and terrorism threats. During his leadership, Saudi faced high youth unemployment, which hit the economy, and initiated policy reform in many aspects to address effective responses to reduce youth unemployment. The graph below visualises the youth unemployment rates, portraying the effects of democratisation on its fluctuation.

Figure 1. Saudi Arabia Youth Unemployment Rate 2003-2022

![Graph of Saudi Arabia Youth Unemployment Rate 2003-2022](source: World Bank, 2023)

Figure 1 indicates that the prospect of democracy was also cultivated by the high percentage of unemployment among young people in Saudi, which reached 29 percent during The Arab Spring and the lowest point of 23.77% by 2022. The economic inequality and disparity among Saudi social classes and tribes also aggravate the high unemployment rates. Correspondingly, Saudi people are inspired by their neighbours who enjoy economic prosperity by implementing democracy and flexibility toward religious
and social life. However, the response of the Saudi government was surprisingly unwavering in strengthening the relationship between the royal family and Islam. The role of religion as the source of stable autocracy is critical for ensuring Saudi youth compliance with the monarchy, limiting freedom and criticism (Uniacke, 2022). This approach was designed to increase the royal family's patronage, and in the end, it could gather more legitimation by incorporating religion with the royal patronage (Mabon, 2012). Second, the enforcement of the law tends to become stricter and unyielding. The prosecution among protesters and activists has tremendously increased.

As the oil industry in Saudi contributes to the domestic economy, the government successfully transfers taxes to the citizens to provide adequate essential services and give them welfare incentives sourced from the oil trade (Ramady, 2005). With the current system, the government could easily maintain political influence to suppress any democratisation effort and tackle the democratic consolidation process by limiting the freedom of expression (Lacroix & Stéphane, 2014). In addition, the role of Islamic law sourced from Wahhabism is the most significant strategy in maintaining the political stability, political influence of the monarchy, and citizens’ compliance because the religious institution also serves as the judicial alternative of the government. The citizen’s non-compliance could easily be prosecuted for treason and punishable by beheading (Lacroix & Stephane, 2011).

Nowadays, numerous Saudi clergy have been devoted to spreading the idea of moderation and tolerance in opposition to terrorism. Various Islamic scholars such as Abd Al-Aziz Al-Qasim, Abdallah Al-Hamid, Hasan Al Maliki, Muhammad Sa'id Tayyib, and Mansur Al Nuqaydan have called for more flexible and moderate Islamic practice in Saudi (Lacroix & Stephane, 2004). This activism strongly opposes Wahhabism as the principal religious jurisprudence in Saudi Arabia. Democratisation prospects remain hindered by the influence of religious fundamentalism, which is incorporated into the political system. The implementation of Sharia law shaped the political system and reduced the possibility of democratisation. Most recently, the Saudi monarch has faced tremendous social media activism because of technological growth (Uniacke, 2022). With the significant increase of Saudi citizens using social media, the awareness and value exchange of modernisation, democracy, and social reform could be more straightforward and massive. The moderate preachers and liberal Shaikh will quickly transform their ideas to challenge the orthodoxy of Wahhabism teachings across Saudi through utilising social media.
Figure 2 indicates the significant development of social media in Saudi Arabia. After the Arab Spring, the number of social media users in Saudi Arabia grew significantly, from 7.6 million users in 2014 to 19 million in 2017. In the recent development, social media users in Saudi Arabia reached the highest point of 27.8 million users in 2021 and 29.5 million users in 2022. With the intense digitalisation and modernisation, Saudi people face broad access to information through social media, which can be accessed freely (Jamali, 2014). The emergence of social activism in the Middle East is the most substantial reason for the significance of democratisation in Saudi (Juned et al., 2015). Social media activism in Saudi has been snowballing since the Arab Spring phenomenon. Finally, social activism initiated the gender movement in Saudi Arabia, which generated women's vote rights at the end of 2015 (Uniacke, 2022). With the significance of social media activism in Saudi Arabia, many experts expect that the democratisation process will eventually be realised.

However, this significance did not succeed in democratisation since the government had counterrevolutionary strategies. The four modes of legitimation that hinder the democratisation process in Saudi Arabia are legal-formal mode, performance mode, co-optation, and discursive-symbolic mode (Ertl, 2015). Specifically, the last strategy of discursive-symbolic mode became the most influential attempt to endorse Saudi's success in diffusing the social media campaign. The government launched a media
campaign that discredited the protest by building narratives that the demonstrations were illegal, led by external agents, and an Iranian-led and Shi’a conspiracy causing chaos. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has benefited more than other countries in the Middle East from its monarchy system, which enables the government to mobilise various sources of legitimacy and traditional, religious, and economic loyalty (Ertl, 2015).

The late King Abdullah Al Saud was the most progressive monarch in Saudi Arabia (Bradley, 2015). Under his leadership, countless progressive changes had been implemented in Saudi, including the right to vote for women. King Abdullah Al Saud was incredibly responsive toward political dynamics in the Middle East, including increasing social media activism. King Abdullah Al Saud was the first king to consider the importance of social media activism. Through his prudent approach, he advocated some aspects that need reform, including gender inequality in Saudi Arabia (Bradley, 2015). King Abdullah Al Saud successfully restrained the disparaging democratisation trend that was caused by the Arab Spring by accommodating several demands from activists in Saudi. The right to vote was an essential indicator of the fundamental change in Saudi Arabia, whether it was democratised or not. However, the hopes for further change have faded with the death of King Abdullah Al Saud, and his successor, King Salman, seems to be implementing conservatism again in Saudi. In contrast with his brother, King Salman is trying to empower religion and stable autocracy in Saudi to oppose further fundamental change, including democratisation.

The Historical Analysis of Wahhabism as The State Ideology in Saudi Arabia

The mission of Wahhabism was always about the purification of Islam and the re-establishment of pure monotheistic dogma in Islam (Commins, 2005). One of the prominent Islamic scholars who taught Wahhabism was Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. He and his followers believed that they had an obligation to spread and preach the purification of Islam. The teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab are considered the most radical because Wahhabist teachings arranged several strict rules between Muslims and infidels (Commins, 2005). Those who did not practice the Wahhabism doctrine are considered an infidel. This view caused significant disagreement between Muslims because Wahhabism quickly labelled other Muslims who were not following the teachings as misguided Muslims or infidels. Thus, Wahhabism considers that "misguided" Muslims are outsiders in the heretic doctrine of monotheism (Commins, 2005; Alrebh, 2021).
Furthermore, the religious authority has its law enforcement agency, Muttaween or Islamic Religious Police. This law enforcement agency works specifically in prosecuting a violation of Sharia law, such as dress code, the separation between men and women while in public, alcohol selling, and other things prohibited by Islam (Al-Atawneh, 2009). This kind of violation became the domain of the Islamic Religious Police, which is working for the pleasure of the King and Islamic Clerics Council. These religious police have broader authority to prevent any suspicious activities within society, often leading to abuse. Numerous cases depict the unreliability of the Islamic Sharia Police as a law enforcement agency in Saudi. The Islamic Religious Police is officially under the supervision and control of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV). The CPVPV is currently an integral part of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. The Islamic Religious Police is also known as the Hai'a by the locals, and this committee works exclusively to prevent any violation of Sharia law and promote goodness and morality to the Saudi people (Al-Atawneh, 2009).

The Islamic Religious Police became the most prominent political tool for the Kingdom to prevent any suspicious movement within society. The trajectory of Wahhabism and absolute control of religious institutions are coherently associated with the trend of undemocratic political institutions within the government. Figure 3 indicates the tendency of the lowest score on the institutionalised democracy index. Therefore, with the current condition of religious, government, and legal institutions under the direct
control of the monarch, the democratic institution in Saudi has never been established. Even though there was a massive democratisation process during the Arab Spring across the Middle East, the current condition of institutionalised democracy in Saudi remains unchanged. Throughout the wave, six social movements demanded specific aspects, such as the anti-corruption movement, labour movement, and Sunni and Shiite reform movements (Menoret, 2016). While these movements succeeded in making small-scale changes (e.g., winning the 2005 municipal election, taking corrupt state employee to court, and making businesses consider their workers), the democratic reform of the regime continued to fail.

According to Figure 3, the source of stagnation toward institutionalised democracy is the occupation of education, which is one of the instruments for creating a stable autocracy. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia places significant importance on Wahhabism, which impacts society (Commins, 2005). The influence of Wahhabism extends beyond just religion and law, as it also plays a critical role in shaping the education system of the country. Notably, Wahhabism defines the curriculum taught in many Saudi Arabian schools as focusing on Islamic teachings and traditions (Commins, 2005). Wahhabist clerics could conduct the indoctrination toward education more efficiently than any other institutions in Saudi, and they will encourage the younger generation to embrace absolute compliance with the monarch as part of their religious life. The Saudi Arabian education system is unequivocally designed to indoctrinate its citizens with nationalistic ideals and instil unwavering loyalty to the state (Lippman, 2012). The situation indicates that the Saudi education system presents a significant hurdle to achieving democratic consolidation, given its inherent goals.

Unfortunately, due to the strong influence of Western education on Saudi government officials, business figures, and intellectuals, the wave of democratisation inevitably began at every layer of Saudi society. From the upper echelons of Saudi society, it is noteworthy that cabinet ministers and business owners are exceedingly urbane, well-educated English speakers, and numerous hold doctoral degrees from US universities (Lippman, 2012). Unavoidably, Saudi intellectuals believe in more progressive perspectives that ultimately encourage Saudi clerics to be more progressive and avoid conservatism. Throughout King Abdullah Al Saud’s reign, education reform was launched to make the young generation of Saudis more relevant and advanced in their studies, especially by sending them abroad (Lippman, 2012). The policy on education reform was started among the very first layer of Saudi elites and business owners, and the
ultimate impact is that progressive change has reached the Saudi religious clergies, the heart of stable autocracy in Saudi (Lippman, 2012). The main agenda of education reform policy is to encourage progressive change; thus, in the future, no more Saudi religious clergies see that the traditional Islamist education system cannot coherent and coexist with modern-day context, especially with the intensification of globalisation and modernisation.

In defence of stable autocracy, Wahhabis proclaim absolute rule over religion and declare that any act of criticism towards traditionalist Islamic Scholars is misguided and unreliable (Commins, 2005). The criticism toward Wahhabi scholars emerged after the massive accusation of Islam as the leading actor of terrorism. Wahhabism in this position has never been concrete with declaring terrorism an erroneous crime. Furthermore, several Wahhabi scholars support the jihadi leader like Osama bin Laden (Commins, 2005). The call for moderation in Saudi has responded to with the arrest of several clerics who were dedicated to the reform; in 2017 up to now, the monarch has been arrested dozens of prominent religious figures on the grounds of treason, incitement, terrorism, and participating in extremist groups (Farouk & Brown, 2021). The tendency of inflexibility for a progressive approach toward religious teaching has been embedded within Wahhabism since Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab preached about the purification of Islam. On this basis, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs has the authority to respond to any activism to be grounded (Farouk & Brown, 2021). With the existence of disagreement among Saudi Scholars, which separated the two groups, traditionalist and modernist, Saudi Arabia will have more glimpses of hope to install democracy and initiate a revolution (Commins, 2005). Unfortunately, with the resilient position of stable autocracy and religious fundamentalism in Saudi, the change will take a long time.

The Prospect of Democracy in The Future of Saudi Arabia
The leading cause that hindered the democratisation process was the strong influence of Wahhabism. Wahhabism in Islam is known for its radical ideas and fundamental views regarding Islam (Commins, 2005). The economic condition in Saudi Arabia, frankly speaking, relies entirely on oil revenue (House, 2012). The financial crisis in 1993-1994 was strong evidence that the Saudi economy was not an advanced economic achievement (Ramady, 2005). However, it was merely the consequence of high exports to foreign countries, especially the U.S. With the strong dependency on the oil industry, the Saudi economy will rely only on tax transfers to create such pseudo-welfare distribution. The
tax transfer to the Saudis through health care and other public facilities is designed to maintain civil obedience by creating a predatory system that makes citizen lose their freedom.

Conversely, the Kingdom and the King supported a stable religious autocracy in the internal sphere. Still, they gave the Ulema Council the extent of authority to control the law and religious sector. This strategy works significantly and hinders any political fluctuation in Saudi Arabia. As indicated in Figure 4, the trajectory of the democratic transition from the Arab Spring until the current day consistently denoted the lowest score.

Figure 4. Democratic Transition in Saudi Arabia 2010-2022

Source: V-Dem Institute, 2023.

The stagnation of education reform played a significant role in halting the generational transition to democracy. Unfortunately, the Islamic education system is implemented in Saudi. The extent of the Islamic education system will hamper the modernisation (Lippman, 2012). In this case, even though there are numerous Western-educated people in Saudi, the foundation of primary education is derived from Islamic teachings. Islamic teaching in Saudi Arabia has become part of the Wahhabism control, which is, in the end, the mindset tends to support stable autocracy (Lippman, 2012). Even though countless scholars have progressive thinking, the Kingdom tends to isolate the academics and limit the room for spreading their ideas. The government also detained many educators as political prisoners with the accusation of treason. With the absolute
control of the law and education by Wahhabism, it is implausible that democratisation will occur soon.

Moreover, another alternative is through Islam itself. With the emergence of moderation in Islam and more progressive clerics in the Saudi Islamic Scholars community, Islam will gain more significance through democratisation and fundamental changes in Saudi (House, 2012). Through the leadership of King Abdullah Al Saud, Saudi has made many significant changes, including the reduction of Islamic Scholars Council authority, gender equity, and the limitation of Islamic Sharia Police authority (House, 2012). The boldest policy that King Abdullah Al Saud implemented could not be separated from the emergence of moderate Islamic clergies that disagree with the Wahhabism approach and doctrine. This element initiates future change in Saudi Arabia (House, 2012). Through the role of moderate and modern Islamic clerics, Saudi will have a political transition and reduce stable autocracy soon. Moreover, the intensification of Saudi students studying abroad, especially in Western countries, also become a strong reason for the change in Saudi. Through the Western education of Saudi citizens, the ruling group will experience change and influence by the democratic Western style (House, 2012).

Figure 5. Mobilization for Democracy in Saudi Arabia 2010-2022

The Absolute monarchy in Saudi manifests the religious stable autocracy that sustains the Saudi Royal family's power inside the country. Saudi royal family holds all
political and military positions, making Saudi the only country ruled by one family (Lacey, 2009). On the other hand, Saudi people also spread Wahhabism as Saudi’s official Islamic school of thought. Wahhabism makes Saudi the only state with substantial relations with radicalism, fundamentalism, and extremism, where the belief as a facilitator contributes to violent extremism (Dillon, 2009). The Saudi government uses Wahhabism to maintain political stability and claim the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques concept. With this concept, the King holds absolute power over all branches of power, which are legislative, executive, and judicial. King became the most influential person in Saudi Arabia and the leader of all the tribes that resided in Saudi Arabia (Lacey, 2009).

Through Wahhabism, the Ibn Saud family succeeded in controlling all the tribes in Saudi and integrated all the tribes under one single state entity. With the imminent stable autocracy, through combining religious power, domination within the economy, and performing tax transfer to the basic public facilities, the stability of the autocratic regime has never been resisted (Pond, 2018). The Saudi government uses Wahhabism to maintain political stability and claim the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques concept. With this concept, the King holds absolute power over all branches of power, which are legislative, executive, and judicial. King became the most influential person in Saudi Arabia and the leader of all the tribes that resided in Saudi Arabia (Lacey, 2009). Through Wahhabism, the Ibn Saud family succeeded in controlling all the tribes in Saudi and integrated all the tribes under one single state entity. With the imminent stable autocracy, through combining religious power, domination within the economy, and performing tax transfer to the basic public facilities, the stability of the autocratic regime has never been resisted (Pond, 2018).

Figure 5 indicates the trend of inconsequential mobilisation for democracy, and the figure shows that the massive mobilisation that happened from 2010 to 2011 was initiated by the Arab Spring. However, from the figure, the trend for mobilisation for democracy is relatively low, even from the beginning of the Arab Spring until today. The monarchy has successfully settled the potency of any mobilisation of democracy through the religious dogma and rightful rights to manage and protect the Two Holy Mosques. In addition, economic packages also ensured domestic loyalty and, therefore, hindered the demand for revolution. In March 2011, the Saudi King extended the economic package, including rising subsidies, public sector salaries, spending on public sector employment, and state-provided housing (Ertl, 2015). Even though this was a strategy to increase
material legitimacy among the people (Al-Rasheed, 2012). The outcomes were limited only to the Sunni population and marginalised the Saudi Shi'a (Matthiesen, 2013).

By 1938, when the massive oil reserves were founded, Saudi became the central power in the Middle East. King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud gathered support from Western countries, especially the U.S., by utilising high petroleum reserves. Through these acts, King Abdul Aziz succeeded in making a deal with President Roosevelt. The deal was about supplying oil to the U.S. and exchanging support for the House of Saud power in their territory. Through this support, Saudi Arabia became influential and dominant in the Middle East. More importantly, the House of Saud could maintain its power toward the Hijaz and Najd without any considerable threat from other tribes. The alliance between the U.S. and the House of Saud has lasted until today. It makes Saudi the most valuable ally of the U.S.

Figure 6 proves how the democratisation agenda of the West could not affect Saudi Arabia because, during the Arab Spring, the oil imports from Saudi Arabia were tremendously high compared to recent years. It could be an imperative indication that the Saudi oil reserve became the most robust bargain to hinder the democratisation agenda of the West, especially from the U.S. The rentier state of Saudi Arabia benefited from the high oil prices when the Arab Spring occurred, enabling the country to successfully diffuse the domestic uprising by increasing public spending for citizen payouts, as well as protecting the authoritarian allies by leading a Sunni monarchical bloc (Kuru, 2014). The graph below shows that U.S. petroleum imports from Saudi Arabia increased significantly from 2009 to 2012 when the democratic wave reached the Middle East.

![Figure 6. U.S. Petroleum Imports from Saudi Arabia from 2000 to 2022](image)

The biggest oil company and producer is the Saudi Arabian Oil Company (Saudi ARAMCO) (Saudi Aramco, 2021). The companies are owned by the government of Saudi Arabia, which shares over 90% of the total share of the company (Saudi Aramco, 2021). The monarch will exclusively manage the oil revenues as the majority share owner. Even though the government policy shares 8% of the Sovereign Wealth Fund through the investment initiated by the Public Investment Fund of Saudi, most of the oil revenue is still owned by the Monarch (Brown, 2024). Saudi citizens are only given 8% to accommodate public facilities, health subsidiaries, and education funds. The current condition of a rentier state was part of the design for creating a source of stable autocracies by maintaining civil obedience through a small portion of wealth distribution to citizens. The monarch is saving most oil revenues and maintaining all aspects of influence through social, economic, and political aspects. The monarch also monopolizes all economic sectors and utilizes the oil industry as an instrument of power internationally and domestically.

In recent developments, the rise of Price Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) as the crown prince and Prime Minister has acknowledged the pressure on the need for Saudi transformation to adapt to the current context of modernisation (Hokayem, 2022). However, Crown Prince MBS intended to refrain from significant reforms in Saudi Arabia. The Crown Prince is establishing a new and innovative source for stable autocracies (Farouk & Brown, 2021). The Crown Prince eagerly arrests significant activists or public figures criticizing the monarch. In his early coronation, the Crown Prince MBS is introducing Saudi Religious Reform. However, the reform was merely a deceiver of his intention to put more repressive behaviour and gain more bargaining power in the diplomatic arena (Hokayem, 2022). Differing from his predecessor, King Abdullah Al Saud was a true reformist. King Abdullah Al Saud promotes more notable changes toward Saudi modernisation through partial elections, women’s rights, education reform, and succession reform. The current Crown Prince is merely an innovation for consolidating his autocratic power. It tends to use repression, killing, and injustice arrest toward the activists that raise the issue of democratisation (Farouk & Brown, 2021). However, the significant change initiated by Crown Prince MBS is creating the oil industry, prices, and his instruments of influence. With the trend of a decrease in US imports of Saudi oil, Crown Prince MBS intends to install a new instrument of bargaining to increase the liability of the US toward the Saudi oil industry (Hokayem, 2022).
The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia symbolizes Islamic revivalism during the Muhammad era in the 7th century. Unfortunately, the claim of Islamic representation is becoming a significant debate. With the extent of political violence, human rights abuse, and corruption in Saudi, it seems Saudi is far from the predicate of Islamic representation. The Kingdom of Saudi is oriented on power and prosperity, never truthfully wanting to dedicate the Kingdom as a holy kingdom or theocratic government (Lacey, 2009). The medieval European monarch style firmly influences the political system, far from Muhammad’s political leadership style. The centre of stability comes from implementing Islamic Sharia and Wahhabism in the country. The stable autocracy in Saudi even hindered the unification of Islam and caused radicalism to emerge in the name of Islam. The close relationship between terrorist organizations and Wahhabism is supposed to become convincing evidence for the root of Islamic radicalism and fundamentalism (Lacey, 2009).

**CONCLUSION**

The source of stable autocracy in Saudi is only from the religious aspect, the gap between society created and structural violence toward religiosity in Saudi. As the state that claimed as The Custodian of Two Holy Mosques, these things are not supposed to happen in the holiest place for Muslims worldwide. With its high petroleum reserves, Saudi Arabia is expected to give prosperity to its citizens. Unfortunately, the increased revenue from oil reserves goes to the Saudi ruling groups and elite families, creating a social and economic gap within the society. The gap is the leading cause of political upheaval in Saudi because several protests became part of the Arab Spring, triggering dissatisfaction with the high unemployment among younger Saudi people. Without implementing a fair economic system that is not dominated by elites, Saudi will face continuous financial and political crises. Stable autocracy and conservatism in Saudi are the roots of violence and terrorism in the Middle East. The government must take the call for moderation within Islamic clergies and the people seriously if they want to make Saudi become the true Custodian of Two Holy Mosques. The Islamic community is diverse based on the cultural and domestic aspects of assimilation. The exclusive labelling of infidels by Wahhabism will hinder the unification of Islamic communities. Therefore, the Saudi monarch developed its survival strategy using a dominating economy through the oil industry, providing all basic public facilities and needs through tax transfer, and giving strong authority to religious institutes. Those strategies have become the most advanced source
of stable autocracy and the primary source for hindering any attempts to mobilize to mobilize democracy.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**
This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. I would also like to thank our research assistants, Alvinda, Tiffany, Muti, Fikri, Afiv, Nurvina, Damanhuri, Bidriyah, and Fahmi, for helping me to construct this article.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


