



Socio-Cultural Transformation of Saudi Arabia Under the Leadership of Muhammad Bin Salman

Nadiya Azahra Hidayat^{1*}, Yon Machmudi², Izdiyan Muttaqin³

^{1,2,3}Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, School of Strategic and Global Studies, Universitas Indonesia

Email: ¹nadiya.azahra18@gmail.com*, ²machmudi@ui.ac.id, ³moh.izdiyan@ui.ac.id

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54099/ijibmr.v5i2.1411>

ARTICLE INFO

Research Paper

Article history:

Received:

Revised: 10 May 2025

Accepted: 15 July 2025

Available online: 15 August 2025

Keywords: Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030, socio-cultural reforms, modernization, social conservatism.

ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study aims to examine the purposes and implications of socio-political changes and cultural dynamics in Saudi Arabia under the de facto leadership of Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), particularly through the Vision 2030 reform agenda. The study explores how Vision 2030 reflects the tensions between modernization efforts and enduring political-cultural conservatism within Saudi society. **Methodology** – Using a qualitative exploratory approach and a descriptive-analytical strategy, the research draws on foreign policy theories by James N. Rosenau and Marijke Breuning to analyze how domestic reform is shaped by both internal dynamics and global pressures. Data were collected through a literature review of credible secondary sources, including official documents, public statements, and academic publications, and analyzed thematically through coding and contextual interpretation. **Findings** – The study finds that while Vision 2030 promotes social liberalization and national identity reconstruction, the reform process remains tightly governed by political authority and religious conservatism, revealing a sustained tension between progressive change and authoritarian continuity. **Conclusion** – These developments suggest that the reforms under MBS represent not a democratic transition, but a calculated modernization project that preserves state control while signaling change. **Contribution/Novelty** – This paper offers a critical perspective on Saudi Arabia's reform era, arguing that Vision 2030 operates as an ideological and hegemonic project, and provides insights into how culture becomes a contested space in authoritarian modernization processes.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia is one of the most influential countries in the Middle East region which for decades has been known for its very conservative socio-political characteristics (Thompson, 2014). The absolute monarchy adopted by Saudi Arabia is strongly based on the interpretation of Wahhabism as the foundation of the state ideology (Odi, 2020). The pattern of relations between the state and society tends to be top-down, with minimal space for citizen participation, especially for women and the younger generation. Within this strict social structure, political stability is maintained through harmony between the royal elite and conservative clerics, as well as control over the dynamics of culture and public life. The historical partnership between the Saudi monarchy and the Wahhabi clerics not only underpins the kingdom's political legitimacy, but also strengthens the role of Islamic law as the basis for regulating public life and legislation. This reflects the distinctive character of the Islamic constitutional law system in Saudi Arabia, where the concept of sovereignty is fundamentally different



from the secular system. A closer look at the scope and implementation of Islamic constitutional law reveals how dynamic this system is in adapting to the challenges of the times (Arrazi, 2024).

However, entering the third decade of the 21st century, according to Rosida (2018) Saudi Arabia has shown a very striking change in policy direction. This transformation was triggered by the emergence of Muhammad bin Salman (MbS) as a dominant figure in Saudi Arabia's national leadership (Zulifan, 2024). According to The Lion (2025) & The Last Supper (2024) One of the major milestones of this change was the launch of Saudi Vision 2030, a long-term development project aimed at reducing dependence on the oil sector, expanding the economic base, and creating a "dynamic and open society." Within this framework, Vision 2030 encompasses not only the economic dimension, but also serves as an instrument of social and cultural reform that touches the lives of society at large. Saudi Vision 2030 is an ambitious initiative launched by Mohammed bin Salman as a strategic framework to transform Saudi Arabia's economy, society and politics. One of the main strengths of this vision is its efforts to diversify the economy, which has been overly dependent on the oil sector (Putri et al., 2021). Through the development of tourism, technology, entertainment and creative industry sectors, the government is trying to create alternative sources of income and open up new jobs, especially for the younger generation (Adriansah, 2021). In addition, Vision 2030 also opens up great opportunities for women to be more involved in public and professional life, which was previously very limited by conservative norms. This reform is also supported by the modernization of infrastructure and the digitalization of public services, which accelerate bureaucratic efficiency and improve the quality of state services to its citizens.

However, behind the various advances offered, Vision 2030 has also drawn much controversy and criticism, both domestically and in the international community. Saudi Arabia's reform projects cannot be separated from the country's social, political, and religious complexities. The modernization carried out brings great potential, but also triggers resistance, controversy, and even an identity crisis. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia is trying to appear as a 21st century country; on the other hand, it is still grappling with the legacy of the 7th century (Abdurrohman et al., 2023). As a result, Saudi Arabian society is experiencing a significant social shift. On the one hand, the younger generation and women are beginning to feel the benefits of the openness offered, such as career opportunities and creative freedom (Sholihah et al., 2023). However, according to Saputra & Rodiah, (2025) While Saudi Vision 2030 has brought some important policy changes regarding women—such as lifting the driving ban and relaxing the guardianship system—these reforms represent more of an effort to modernize the economy than a fundamental shift in gender relations. The changes are geared toward supporting economic growth and improving Saudi Arabia's global image, while other issues of inequality, such as discrimination in family law, remain largely unaddressed.

Politically, Vision 2030 strengthens the consolidation of Muhammad bin Salman's power as the sole dominant leader. The socio-political development that was originally aimed at creating a "dynamic and open" society has instead created the irony of cultural openness but accompanied by the closure of political space (Sadewa, 2024). Therefore, Vision 2030 can be seen as a transformation project that has a double impact: economically and socially progressive, but remains politically authoritarian. The success of this vision depends not only on material progress, but also on the state's ability to create spaces for participation and guarantee citizens' rights in a sustainable manner. Modernization accompanied by a campaign to build Saudi nationalism is no longer entirely based on conservative Islamic identity, but also on a narrative of progress, openness, and national pride (Adriansah, 2021). These changes reflect a significant shift in values in the social structure of Saudi Arabian society. On the one hand, the leadership of Muhammad bin Salman is praised for its courage in challenging the status quo and pushing for transformation in the socio-political system. However, on the other hand,

these reforms are also accompanied by increased state repression against critical voices, including human rights activists, political opposition, and other groups considered to threaten the legitimacy of the reform agenda from above. This condition gives rise to a paradox: in the midst of efforts to liberalize society, the state is actually strengthening authoritarian political control (Rahman et al., 2019). Furthermore, this socio-cultural transformation also gives rise to new dynamics in society. The younger generation shows enthusiasm for new opportunities in education, work, and cultural expression (Saputra & Rodiah, 2025; Sholihah et al., 2023). However, some conservative groups responded with resistance, raising tensions between tradition and modernity, between a rigid Islamic identity and a narrative of progressive nationalism. This situation shows the complexity of Saudi Arabia's socio-political development: changes that appearing modern is not necessarily fully inclusive or democratic.

In this context, it is crucial to critically examine Saudi Arabia's socio-political development through a socio-cultural approach, particularly by highlighting how the reforms initiated by Mohammed bin Salman under Vision 2030 are transforming values, cultural structures, and power relations within society. Most previous studies have tended to focus on economic achievements or symbolic openness, without critically exploring the tensions between modernization agendas and ongoing political-cultural conservatism. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by exploratively analyzing how social and cultural changes under Vision 2030 are interpreted by the state and society, and how these changes reshape power relations, national identity, and spaces of participation within an authoritarian political order. This study emphasizes the importance of viewing culture as an arena of contestation and articulation of hegemony, allowing for an understanding of reform not merely as a technocratic policy, but as a complex ideological project within a modern authoritarian state.

METHOD

This study uses an exploratory qualitative approach that aims to deeply understand the meaning behind the dynamics of Saudi Arabian foreign policy under the de facto leadership of Muhammad bin Salman (MBS), especially in the context of the implementation of Vision 2030. This approach was chosen because it is considered relevant to explain the complexity of the interaction between domestic factors and the international environment that influence each other in the formation of a country's foreign policy. As stated by Creswell (2012), a qualitative approach allows researchers to interpret the social meanings constructed by actors based on their experiences and contexts. Therefore, this study does not only rely on empirical data, but also emphasizes a hermeneutic understanding of the narratives, symbols, and political representations that emerge in Saudi Arabian foreign policy.

The type of research used is a qualitative descriptive-analytical study, with the aim of describing and interpreting the phenomenon in depth, not to test hypotheses or measure the relationship between variables quantitatively. This strategy allows researchers to describe the dynamics of Saudi Arabian foreign policy contextually, as well as to analyze the construction of meaning, political agendas, and strategic directions that have changed during MBS's leadership. The theoretical framework used is the foreign policy theory developed by James N. Rosenau and Marijke Breuning. Rosenau sees foreign policy as an adaptive response to external dynamics, while Breuning emphasizes the importance of strategic choices influenced by domestic aspirations and the country's position in the international system. By combining these two perspectives, this study can analyze Saudi Arabian foreign policy as a product of the interaction between global pressures and domestic reform agendas.

This study uses the nation-state level of analysis, where Saudi Arabia is positioned as a rational actor that has the capacity to determine the direction of its foreign policy based on calculations of national interests. The state is analysed as an autonomous entity that adapts to the international environment through internal and external reform strategies summarized in the Vision 2030 agenda. In this context, Saudi Arabia is understood as an actor that not only reacts to external pressures, but also actively reshapes its identity, position, and influence in the global order through various strategic and measurable foreign policies.



The data collection technique used is library research by relying on relevant and credible secondary data. Data sources include official documents of the Saudi Arabian government, MBS's public statements, Vision 2030 documents, reports from international institutions such as the World Bank and IMF, and academic publications from reputable journals that discuss Middle Eastern politics and international relations. Data analysis was carried out using a thematic analysis approach through the initial coding stage, theme grouping, and contextual interpretation. To maintain validity and credibility, source triangulation techniques were used by comparing various perspectives and cross-checking data from reputable scientific institutions and international media.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Saudi Arabia, located on the Arabian Peninsula, has long been known as an oil-rich country with great influence in the global economy and the Islamic world (Alfarisi, 2023). The Arab country is known to maintain a conservative social structure that is heavily influenced by a strict interpretation of Islamic values and relies significantly on the oil sector as the main source of national income. However, since the emergence of Muhammad bin Salman (MbS) to the leadership stage in 2015 and his official appointment in 2017, Saudi Arabia has entered an era of transformation through the ambitious Vision 2030 program (Mihoubi, 2025).

Within the framework of James N. Rosenau and Marijke Breuning's foreign policy theory, this dynamic can be read as a state's attempt to navigate the interaction between global pressures and domestic conditions. Rosenau emphasizes that a state's foreign policy is influenced by internal factors (such as cultural values, political structures, and domestic elites) and external factors (such as globalization, international expectations, and global markets) (Rosenau, 1997). Meanwhile, Breuning emphasized that the policy-making elite acts as an actor who interprets this condition and then designs policies that are considered most appropriate for national interests (Breunig & Koski, 2018).

In this context, according to The Lion (2025) Vision 2030 can be understood as MbS's response to external pressures in the form of global oil price fluctuations, demands for economic diversification, and international pressures related to Saudi Arabia's conservative image. On the other hand, this reform also emerged as a response to domestic dynamics in the form of increasing aspirations of urban youth, limitations of an oil-based economy, and the need to strengthen the legitimacy of power. The structural reforms introduced range from limiting the role of the Moral Police, allowing women to drive, to reopening cinemas—representing the decisions of domestic elites in responding to the tension between traditional values and the demands of global modernity.

The launch of global strategic projects such as NEOM and the development of Red Sea tourism marks the country's efforts to transition from an oil-dependent economy to a technology and services-based economy. According to (Frag, 2019) The NEOM project is not only a physical development, but also an arena for contestation of identity, political legitimacy, and the country's ability to adapt in the face of domestic and global pressures. The vision of NEOM's development reflects the principles of globalization, namely increasing the flow of ideas, capital, and technology across countries. The promised special economic zone with its own legal and taxation system shows a deliberate statecraft effort (Breuning, 2007) to create an economic enclave relatively autonomous from national regulatory structures, a strategy common in free-market development models. However, this ambitious project is not free from complex structural problems. The text notes major challenges such as resistance from domestic conservative groups, dependence on support from neighboring countries, and economic conditions due to global oil price volatility. Theoretically, this is in line with the view (Rosenau, 2000) about fragmentation a phenomenon in which states face simultaneous pressures for global integration

and local disintegration. On the one hand, the government wants to appear as a modern and progressive actor; on the other hand, it must face internal resistance that threatens sociopolitical stability.

1. Impact on Social and Cultural Dynamics

Various studies agree that the social transformation initiated by Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) has had a significant impact on the social and cultural dynamics of Saudi Arabia (Al-Ghamdi, 2020; Sirri, 2024). These changes include a redefinition of women's roles, openness in cultural expression, and a shift from previously conservative social norms to more modern and inclusive forms (Ehsan, 2023; Zahran, 2019). Framed within Rosenau's theory of interdependence, this transformation cannot be viewed as an isolated domestic phenomenon. Instead, it is shaped by complex interactions between global normative pressures—such as gender equality, freedom of expression, and human rights—and local efforts to maintain internal stability (Rosenau, 1990).

Rosenau (1990) argues that states operating in an increasingly interconnected global system must adapt to external pressures while preserving internal cohesion. In the case of Saudi Arabia, this means balancing modernizing reforms with deeply entrenched traditional and religious values. MbS emerges as the central agent in this balancing act. As Koç (2019) notes, he has effectively restructured the Saudi power dynamic, sidelining older generations of leadership and asserting control over key portfolios—including defense, the economy, and social policy. These structural shifts have enabled a wave of reforms: from expanding women's public roles to liberalizing cultural spaces, and opening up previously prohibited forms of entertainment.

However, these top-down reforms also generate friction. Rapid modernization has sparked tensions between progressive segments of society, often composed of youth and urban elites, and conservative religious or tribal groups who perceive these changes as threats to their values (Al-Rasheed, 2018). Examples such as the reopening of cinemas or the hosting of music concerts have prompted pushback from religious clerics, who view these moves as “moral decline” (Ramadan, 2024). As Rosenau (1990) points out, such domestic identity fragmentation may influence not only internal cohesion but also the Kingdom's external stance.

Compounding this is the centralization of authority under MbS, which has been marked by strict control over state institutions, media, and civil society (Alhussein, 2023; Rafique & Butt, 2021). Despite the façade of openness, political participation remains virtually nonexistent, and the crackdown on dissent continues. This creates a paradox: Saudi Arabia promotes an image of modernity on the international stage (Uniacke, 2021), while domestically maintaining an authoritarian grip—a dynamic that underscores the tension between global branding and local realities (Rosenau, 1990).

Finally, the Kingdom's increasingly active engagement in global cultural diplomacy—through international festivals, tourism campaigns, and sporting events—should be understood as part of an elite strategy to manage public perception and secure political legitimacy. As Breuning (2007) emphasizes, international identity can be used by elites not only to reflect domestic change but also to project stability and progress for strategic gain. In Saudi Arabia's case, social reform is not only a tool for internal transformation but also a calculated means of shaping global opinion and reinforcing regime authority. Against this backdrop, the following subsections examine the specific dimensions of Saudi Arabia's shifting social landscape—starting with one of the most emblematic areas of change: the evolving role of women in society.

a. Changing Role of Women

The transformation of women's roles in Saudi Arabia is one of the most prominent markers of the country's ongoing reform under Vision 2030 (Kedan, 2023). Traditionally confined to domestic life and limited public engagement, women are now increasingly present in higher education, the workforce, and even government. These changes are not only symbolic but also strategically linked to national goals of economic diversification and modernization.

Female university enrollment has surged, with women now entering fields such as law, engineering, and political science. This educational advancement has paved the way for wider



participation in public life. Meanwhile, reforms in labor and governance such as lifting restrictions on female employment and appointing women to senior leadership roles signal a deliberate state effort to rebrand Saudi Arabia as progressive and inclusive (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017).

One milestone was the 2018 lifting of the driving ban, a decision celebrated globally as a victory for women's rights. However, this progress exists in tension with the state's repression of women's rights activists, including Loujain al-Hathloul, who were imprisoned for advocating the very reforms the state later adopted. This paradox highlights the instrumentalization of women's rights: reform is encouraged when it enhances regime legitimacy but punished when it emerges from grassroots activism. In this context, women are both empowered and controlled. Their inclusion serves both economic necessity and image-building, yet remains tightly bounded by political red lines. Thus, Saudi Arabia's gender reforms reflect a model of state-managed empowerment—progressive in appearance, but limited in democratic substance.

b. Elite Strategy and Political Legitimacy

Social reforms under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) serve not only to modernize Saudi Arabia but also to consolidate elite power and reinforce political legitimacy (Stenslie, 2018). MbS has positioned himself as the architect of progress, linking the country's modernization directly to his leadership. Vision 2030, while framed as a development agenda, also functions as a political branding tool, portraying MbS as an indispensable reformer and securing his dominance within the royal hierarchy.

This performance-based legitimacy, however, masks the absence of political liberalization. While certain social freedoms have expanded such as increased space for women and entertainment there remains no real opening for political participation, dissent, or the growth of independent civil society. The political system continues to operate under absolute monarchy, with tight control over media, online discourse, and civil activism.

The 2018 assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi exemplifies the regime's willingness to suppress dissent even beyond its borders, reinforcing a climate of fear and control. These actions reveal the paradox at the heart of MbS's reforms: progress is permitted when orchestrated from above, but grassroots demands or critiques are treated as threats.

As Breuning (2007) suggests, elites may embrace reform not to democratize but to strengthen their hold on power. In Saudi Arabia, reforms are top-down and instrumental—used to attract international support and manage internal expectations—while the core authoritarian structure remains untouched. This model of authoritarian modernization allows for selective liberalization in appearance, but ultimately serves to entrench elite control and deflect genuine democratic transformation.

c. Megaprojects and Institutional Modernization

Megaprojects like NEOM, a futuristic smart city, represent a key pillar of Mohammed bin Salman's modernization agenda. Marketed as hubs of innovation, sustainability, and global investment, these initiatives are intended to signal Saudi Arabia's shift away from oil dependency and align the Kingdom with global trends in urban development and green technology (Abedalrhman & Alzaydi, 2024).

However, these projects are more than infrastructure—they function as strategic instruments of soft power, crafted to reshape international perceptions and project an image of a progressive, forward-thinking Saudi Arabia. As Hatami (2024) and Gilbert (2023) observe, NEOM and similar initiatives are curated displays aimed at attracting global attention, positioning the Kingdom as a leader in tech and environmental innovation. Yet, this image of progress often clashes with the

underlying authoritarian political structure. While NEOM promotes ideals such as transparency and empowerment, its development has been marred by centralized decision-making, lack of public input, and repressive practices, such as the displacement and persecution of the Howeitat tribe. This reveals a deeper institutional dissonance: economic modernization is not accompanied by political reform, and the new institutions risk becoming extensions of elite control rather than vehicles for public empowerment.

This contradiction underscores the imbalance between symbolic progress and authoritarian reality. Saudi Arabia promotes itself as radically transforming, yet continues to detain dissenters, suppress civil society, and restrict judicial independence (Unjacke, 2021). The vision of NEOM as a city free from traditional constraints is particularly ironic when juxtaposed with the Kingdom's internal repression. Ultimately, these megaprojects serve a dual purpose: while stimulating economic diversification, they also act as political tools to reinforce elite legitimacy and divert attention from the absence of democratic reform. They encapsulate the paradox of Saudi modernization—a glossy façade of progress concealing an undemocratic core.

d. Global Identity Dynamics vs. Domestic Politics

A defining paradox of Saudi Arabia's contemporary transformation lies in the tension between its aspiration for a progressive global identity and the persistence of authoritarian domestic politics. Under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Kingdom has sought to rebrand itself from a conservative monarchy to a modern nation embracing values such as innovation, gender equality, and cultural openness. This image is carefully constructed through high-profile initiatives: hosting global sporting events, sponsoring international festivals, and promoting megaprojects like NEOM. These moves function as soft power strategies, aimed at attracting foreign investment and reshaping the Kingdom's place in the global order. Yet this outward projection masks a more repressive internal reality. While certain social reforms have expanded freedoms in entertainment and women's rights, they are tightly regulated by the state. Criticism of the government, advocacy for democratic participation, and human rights activism are frequently met with censorship, surveillance, and imprisonment.

This contradiction is most evident when reform-minded individuals—whose goals align with the state's public messaging—are punished for independent activism, revealing that reforms are permissible only when directed from above. The result is a fragile balance between the performance of progress and the preservation of control. Breuning's theory of foreign policy and identity provides a useful lens: international identity becomes a strategic tool used by elites to secure legitimacy, not necessarily a mirror of internal democratic evolution. In Saudi Arabia, this curated image supports geopolitical influence and elite prestige while obscuring the lack of structural political change. Thus, the Kingdom's global identity operates less as an outcome of deep reform and more as an elite-driven narrative, serving to sustain authoritarian rule under the guise of modernization. The gap between this narrative and domestic repression underscores the limits of top-down reform and the instrumental use of global discourse to mask enduring authoritarianism.

2. Contribution to Socio-Political Development

The social reforms spearheaded by Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) have not only altered the cultural landscape of Saudi Arabia but also reshaped the foundations of its socio-political development. In line with Rosenau's (2018) theory of foreign policy adaptation, Saudi Arabia's reform trajectory reflects efforts to remain globally relevant by internalizing principles of modernization—such as transparency, participation, and innovation—into a traditionally centralized and authoritarian governance structure.

These reforms have opened limited yet strategic space for social and economic participation. Citizens, especially women and youth, are increasingly encouraged to engage in the labor market,



education, and entrepreneurship. Digital infrastructure and literacy programs have further extended civic access to information and public discourse. While these initiatives promote inclusivity and national capacity building, they are also carefully regulated by the state to avoid political disruption.

Viewed through Breuning's (2007) lens, such reforms are elite strategies designed not to democratize governance, but to sustain political legitimacy. Vision 2030, as MbS's flagship program, reinforces his image as a transformative leader while centralizing authority and silencing dissent. The media, civil society, and political opposition remain under tight control, signaling that liberalization in the cultural and economic spheres does not translate into political openness.

Additionally, megaprojects like NEOM represent the institutional side of this transformation. These developments symbolize progress and modernity, yet also expose contradictions between economic ambition and authoritarian governance (Hatami, 2024; Gilbert, 2023). Their top-down execution, often involving repression of local communities, highlights the limits of institutional modernization in the absence of public accountability.

Lastly, the Kingdom's proactive global rebranding—via cultural diplomacy and soft power—is designed to elevate its international identity. However, the contrast between external progressiveness and internal repression underscores the gap between image and reality. As Breuning emphasizes, international identity can serve as a political tool for elite legitimacy rather than reflect internal democratization. The following analysis explores these dynamics through four key aspects: (1) social and economic participation of citizens, (2) elite strategy and political legitimacy, (3) megaprojects and institutional modernization, and (4) global identity dynamics versus domestic politics.

a. Social and Economic Participation of Citizens

Under Mohammed bin Salman's leadership, one of the most notable outcomes of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 has been the gradual expansion of public participation in social and economic development (Hidayat et al., 2022). The reform agenda positions citizens especially women and youth as vital contributors to national progress. This strategy serves dual purposes: reducing economic dependence on oil and subtly redefining the relationship between the state and its citizens.

Key to this transformation is the widening access to education and employment. The government has invested in universities, vocational institutions, and scholarship programs, opening doors for broader segments of society, including women and underserved regions. At the same time, reforms in labor policies have facilitated citizen employment in emerging sectors such as tourism, IT, and entrepreneurship shifting reliance away from foreign labor.

Women and youth are central to this agenda. With one of the youngest populations in the region, Saudi Arabia has launched numerous initiatives to encourage youth-led innovation and civic engagement. Women's entry into public life through legal reforms and incentives for hiring—has increased their visibility in business, government, and education, signaling a significant shift from traditional gender roles.

Digitalization has further transformed civic participation. The widespread use of smartphones, social media, and online government services has made information more accessible and created new spaces for expression and engagement. Digital literacy programs have empowered citizens, especially the youth, to interact with public institutions and participate informally in governance.

Although formal democratic institutions remain absent, these developments represent a subtle evolution in citizen-state dynamics. Through greater access to education, economic opportunity, and digital tools, segments of the population are becoming more engaged in shaping their society. While political authority remains centralized, the foundation for a more participatory and pluralistic future is gradually taking shape.

b. Elite Strategy and Political Legitimacy

Saudi Arabia's recent reform agenda under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) is often praised for its ambitious modernization, but a deeper examination reveals that these reforms primarily serve as a strategy for elite consolidation rather than genuine democratization (Hidayat et al., 2022). Through Vision 2030, MbS has positioned himself as the face of progress, linking economic diversification, social liberalization, and cultural reforms directly to his leadership. This strategy enhances both his domestic authority and international image, portraying him as a bold reformer in a historically conservative monarchy.

Key reforms such as the expansion of women's rights, the introduction of entertainment venues, and the promotion of technological innovation are strategically curated to appeal to younger Saudis and foreign investors. However, these reforms remain tightly managed by the state and exclude meaningful political liberalization. Political parties, independent media, and civil society remain absent or heavily restricted. Social freedoms are permitted only within the confines of state narratives, reinforcing a top-down model of change.

Central to this approach is the control of dissent. The government exercises strict oversight of media and digital platforms, with critics often facing imprisonment, censorship, or exile. High-profile incidents like the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi exemplify the lengths to which the regime will go to suppress opposition.

This approach reflects what scholars such as Breuning (2007) describe as authoritarian modernization: a model where social and economic reforms are used not to democratize governance but to secure elite legitimacy. In the Saudi case, reform is not a pathway to pluralism but a carefully managed instrument of regime stability. MbS's strategy demonstrates how modernization can be used to consolidate power while preserving the authoritarian core of the state.

c. Megaprojects and Institutional Modernization

Among the most visible elements of Saudi Arabia's modernization agenda are its megaprojects most notably NEOM, a \$500 billion smart city envisioned as a hub of innovation and sustainability (Hatami, 2024). These developments aim to reposition the Kingdom as a technologically advanced, investment-friendly nation and to signal a departure from its oil-dependent and conservative past. Framed within Vision 2030, they serve not only economic objectives but also function as tools of soft power, aimed at reshaping global perceptions of Saudi Arabia.

Yet beneath the progressive narrative lies a fundamental contradiction. While the state promotes futuristic cities and digital transformation, it does so within an authoritarian framework. Public participation in planning and governance remains limited, and dissent is systematically repressed. The development of NEOM has drawn criticism for the displacement and repression of indigenous communities, such as the Howeitat tribe, highlighting the absence of accountability and procedural justice.

This contradiction underscores the tension between symbolic progress and political repression. The government showcases modern infrastructure to global audiences, yet domestically enforces tight media control and restricts civil liberties. As Rosenau's theory of interdependence suggests, external pressures may push the state toward modernization, but internal power dynamics and elite interests ultimately shape how change unfolds often in fragmented or contradictory ways.

Thus, while megaprojects like NEOM offer an image of transformation, they risk becoming top-down demonstrations of state power rather than inclusive platforms for development (Menyushina, 2025). Without parallel reforms in governance, rule of law, and public accountability, Saudi Arabia's modernization will remain largely superficial. The polished façade of progress masks a deeper entrenchment of authoritarian control, raising concerns about the sustainability and authenticity of the country's reform agenda.



d. Global Identity Dynamics vs. Domestic Politics

Saudi Arabia's recent reform trajectory reflects not only an internal effort to modernize but also a strategic initiative to construct a progressive global identity. Under Mohammed bin Salman's leadership, the Kingdom has made visible moves to reposition itself as a modern, innovative, and culturally open state actively distancing itself from the ultra-conservative image it held for decades (Claparols, 2023). These efforts include the promotion of gender inclusivity, investment in the entertainment and tourism industries, and active participation in global events such as international sports tournaments, cultural festivals, and global summits.

This carefully curated international image serves multiple strategic functions. Externally, it enhances Saudi Arabia's attractiveness to foreign investors, international partners, and global institutions. Internally, it allows the ruling elite to claim visionary leadership, appearing as responsive to the aspirations of a modernizing youth population. However, this projection of progressiveness often stands in stark contrast to the domestic political reality, where civil liberties remain tightly restricted, and dissent is met with systematic repression.

Despite selective social liberalization such as easing gender segregation, permitting concerts, and reducing the powers of the religious police the fundamental political structure remains authoritarian. Political activism, independent journalism, and calls for democratic participation are still criminalized. The state tightly controls public discourse, using surveillance, censorship, and harsh penalties to silence critics. This creates a core contradiction: the government promotes limited social freedoms as symbols of change while continuing to constrain political freedoms and suppress opposition.

This contradiction is not accidental but strategically managed, aligning with Breuning's (2007) argument that a state's international identity is not merely a reflection of its internal dynamics, but a tool used by political elites to construct legitimacy. In the Saudi context, reforms are designed and publicized not to democratize the system, but to enhance regime legitimacy and neutralize both internal and external criticism. By presenting a modernizing image internationally, the regime can deflect attention from ongoing human rights violations and the lack of political participation at home. In essence, Saudi Arabia's global identity functions as a form of political capital—a resource that elites mobilize to reinforce their authority. This tactic also serves to shield the Kingdom from external pressure by demonstrating superficial alignment with global norms, even when domestic practices fall short. As a result, the reform process becomes less about structural transformation and more about image management, revealing the disjuncture between symbolic gestures of progress and the enduring grip of authoritarian rule.

Table 1. Socio-Cultural Transformation of Saudi Arabia Under the Leadership of Muhammad bin Salman

| Main Theme | Socio-Cultural Aspects | Before MBS | Transformation under MBS | Social/Cultural Impact |
|--|---|--|---|---|
| Impact on Social and Cultural Dynamics | Changing Role of Women | Women confined to domestic roles; limited public participation | Increased access to education, employment, leadership; driving rights granted | Enhanced female visibility; symbolic empowerment; state-controlled feminism |
| | Cultural Liberalization and Public Expression | Strict religious control; no cinemas or concerts | Public events allowed; cultural sector opened; reduced religious police control | Social diversification; emergence of creative industries; conservative backlash |

| | | | | |
|---|--|--|---|---|
| Contribution to Socio-Political Development | Globalization and Identity Fragmentation | Strong traditional values; global norms marginalized | Adoption of global discourses (equality, freedom); tension among generations | Identity negotiation; generational divide; rise in value conflicts |
| | Power Center and Social Representation | Collective royal leadership; slow reform | Centralization of reform in MbS; reform presented as top-down elite project | State-led modernization; minimal grassroots engagement; symbolic representation |
| | Citizen Socio-Economic Participation | Limited roles for youth and women; reliance on foreign labor | Educational reforms, job creation, digital access; youth and women empowered | Increased civic participation; inclusive development narrative; rise in digital citizenship |
| | Elite Strategy and Political Legitimacy | Reform fragmented among elites; slow image change | Vision 2030 used to centralize legitimacy under MbS; reforms marketed internationally | Image-building for regime legitimacy; restricted civil-political rights |
| | Megaprojects and Institutional Modernization | Focus on oil and basic infrastructure | Launch of NEOM and smart cities; emphasis on innovation and sustainability | Global branding success; displacement issues; elite control over urban transformation |
| | Global Identity vs. Domestic Politics | Seen as closed, conservative, and repressive | Image of openness promoted abroad; international events and investment | Strategic soft power; tension between projected progressiveness and domestic repression |

CONCLUSION

Although previous studies have discussed social and economic reforms in Saudi Arabia, most tend to focus on macro-structural aspects such as economic policy and foreign diplomacy. The main drawback of these studies is the lack of in-depth exploration of the cultural dimensions and reconstruction of national identity as a consequence of the Vision 2030 reforms. In addition, the approaches used are often still normative and do not critically link social transformation with the dynamics of political power that remains authoritarian.

This article offers a unique contribution by examining the socio-cultural transformation of Saudi Arabia through a critical socio-cultural approach that highlights the paradox between modernization and political control. The uniqueness of this study lies in mapping the ways in which the Muhammad bin Salman regime reproduces national identity, by balancing traditional values and the demands of global modernization. By uniting social, cultural, and political dimensions in one analytical framework, this article is able to provide a more complete picture of the dynamics of change that are currently occurring in Saudi Arabia. Practically, the findings in this article can be a reference for policy makers and cultural diplomacy actors in designing strategies that are sensitive to the internal social dynamics in conservative countries undergoing transformation. While theoretically, this article enriches the discourse on the reconstruction of national identity in the context of authoritarian countries that adopt modernization projects, and offers an alternative approach in reading the relationship between culture, power, and political legitimacy.

References

Abdurrohman, M. A., Ahrori, M. H., & Pangastuti, R. (2023). Ulama dan Politik di Arab Saudi: Dilema



- Konservatisme dan Modernitas: Tantangan Terkini bagi Ulama dan Politik di Arab Saudi. *AL-MIKRAJ Jurnal Studi Islam Dan Humaniora* (E-ISSN 2745-4584), 4(1), 768–778.
- Abedalrhman, K., & Alzaydi, A. (2024). Saudi Arabia's Strategic Leap towards a Diversified Economy and Technological Innovation. *Available at SSRN* 5048258.
- Adriansah, A. (2021). *Peran Politik Muhammad bin Salman dalam modernisasi menuju visi 2030 arab saudi*. Fakultas Syariah dan Hukum UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta.
- Akbar, F., & Rasyidah, R. (2024). Saudi Vision 2030: Upaya Nation Branding Arab Saudi via Saudi Pro League 2019-2023. *Global and Policy Journal of International Relations*, 12(01).
- ALFARISI, K. (2023). *Strategi Diplomasi Publik Arab Saudi Untuk Meningkatkan Pariwisata Dalam Meminimalisir Ketergantungan Ekspor Minyak Bagi Pendapatan Negara Periode 2020–2021*.
- Alsubaie, A., & Jones, K. (2017). An overview of the current state of women's leadership in higher education in Saudi Arabia and a proposal for future research directions. *Administrative Sciences*, 7(4), 36.
- Arrazi, M. (2024). Kesalahpahaman Konsep Hakimiyah dalam Memahami Makna dari Alquran Tentang Konsep Kedaulatan dan Legitimasi Pemerintah dalam Tata Negara Islam. *MADANIA Jurnal Hukum Pidana Dan Ketatanegaraan Islam*, 14(1), 45–57.
- Breunig, C., & Koski, C. (2018). Interest groups and policy volatility. *Governance*, 31(2), 279–297.
- Breuning, M. (2007). *Foreign policy analysis: A comparative introduction*. Springer.
- Farag, A. A. (2019). The story of NEOM city: Opportunities and challenges. *New Cities and Community Extensions in Egypt and the Middle East: Visions and Challenges*, 35–49.
- Fonseca Claparols, M. (2023). *Mohammed Bin Salman and his Foreign Policy: Shifting Tendencies in his Quest for Legitimacy*.
- Hatami, D. (2024). *Imaginary futures: an analysis of the future smart city through THE LINE*. University of British Columbia.
- Hidayat, N. A., Machmudi, Y., & Soekarba, S. R. (2022). Vision 2030: Saudi Arabia'S Modernization. *Jurnal CMES*, 15(2), 137.
- Kedan, S. (2023). *The role of women in the reforms in Saudi Arabia*.
- Mas' Odi, M. O. (2020). Wahhabisme Vis-à-vis Reformasi Arab Saudi: MBS, Agensi, Moderasi, dan Diversifikasi Ekonomi. *Al-Irfan*, 3(1), 52–76.
- Menyushina, D. (2025). Governance Structures and Their Role in the Success of Utopian Mega-Projects: A Comparative Study of Utopian Mega-projects Governance Within Strong Centralized Visionary Governments. *LSE International Development Review*, 4(1).
- Mihoubi, F. (2025). The Impact of the National Transformation Program and Vision 2030 on Public Governance in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia., 13(1), 593–611.

- Putri, M. S., Windiani, R., & Paramasatya, S. (2021). Liberalisasi Ekonomi Arab Saudi dalam Saudi Vision 2030. *Journal of International Relations Diponegoro*, 7(3), 123–130.
- Rahman, S., Hum, S., & Tengah, K. K. T. (2019). Arab Saudi Baru: Visi 2030, Reformasi Dan Wahabisme. Yogyakarta: UIN Sunan Kalijaga.
- Rosenau, J. N. (1997). *Along the domestic-foreign frontier: Exploring governance in a turbulent world* (Issue 53). Cambridge University Press.
- Rosenau, J. N. (2000). The governance of fragmentation: Neither a world republic nor a global interstate system. *Studia Diplomatica*, 15–39.
- Rosida, A. (2018). Wacana Modernisasi Dalam Tantangan Peradaban, Peran Perempuan Sebagai Tonggak Sejarah Arab Saudi. *Palita: Journal of Social Religion Research*, 3(1), 81–96.
- Sadewa, M. B. (2024). *PENGARUH PENERAPAN “SAUDI VISION 2030” TERHADAP PERUBAHAN SOSIAL POLITIK DI ARAB SAUDI*. Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang.
- Saputra, B. A., & Rodiah, I. (2025). Ketidaksetaraan Gender, Wahabisme Dan Visi Saudi 2030: Kritik Feminisme Postkolonial Melawan Ketidakadilan Di Arab Saudi. *Abdurrauf Law and Sharia*, 2(1), 88–111.
- Sholihah, N., Ummah, A. K., Wargadinata, W., & Jannah, H. (2023). Transformation of the roles of Saudi Arabian women post-implementation of the "Saudi Vision 2030" in the perspective of modernism. *Jurnal CMES*, 16(2), 201–210.
- Sinaga, E. (2025). Strategi Ekonomi Arab Saudi Dalam Mewujudkan Rewarding Opportunities Pada Saudi Vision 2030. *Global Insights Journal: Jurnal Mahasiswa Hubungan Internasional*, 2(1).
- Stenslie, S. (2018). The end of elite unity and the stability of Saudi Arabia. *The Washington Quarterly*, 41(1), 61–82.
- Thompson, M. C. (2014). *Saudi Arabia and the Path to Political Change*.
- Uniacke, R. (2021). Authoritarianism in the information age: state branding, depoliticizing and ‘de-civilizing’ of online civil society in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 48(5), 979–999.
- Zulifan, M. Z. (2024). Moderasi Islam, Salafisme, dan Reformasi Kerajaan Arab Saudi oleh Muhammad Bin Salman. *Nady Al-Adab: Jurnal Bahasa Arab*, 21(2), 15–41.