

The Good Dictator? Mohammed bin Salman's Quest to Balance Progress and Repression

Written by Mohammad Javad Mousavizadeh

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President Donald Trump visited Riyadh in May for the first major overseas trip of his second term, showering Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, with praise as "an incredible man" and a "great guy" at the investment summit. Amid applause and flashing cameras, Trump disregarded the kingdom's human rights record—including the 2018 assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, which U.S. intelligence linked to MBS—while celebrating Saudi pledges of billions in defense and AI deals, including a reported \$142 billion weapons agreement. This warm embrace underscores the delicate dance of interests that define Saudi Arabia's global image: a nation trying to achieve its ambitions under Vision 2030, yet shadowed by repressive actions that test the boundaries of international acceptance.

In Saudi Arabia, an absolute monarchy has woven a striking paradox: a society where personal satisfaction often rivals that of democracies, even as repression remains a cornerstone of its rule. The latest FII Priority Global Survey reveals that 84 percent of Saudis express contentment with their lives, lifted by free healthcare, low inflation, and expanding economic and social freedoms. Critics contend this happiness is a brittle construct, engineered by a state that criminalizes dissent. Yet, for a rising generation, these gains have bred a loyalty so deep that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman—known as MBS—might well triumph in a hypothetical election, despite the kingdom's lack of democratic institutions. Unelected but relatively attuned to public desires, the Saudi government has threaded popular aspirations into its ambitious Vision 2030, crafting an image of stability and well-being that veils the autocracy's unyielding suppression of opposition.

This satisfaction comes from a system where power is inherited rather than contested, and accountability depends on the monarchy's self-directed reforms. Unlike democratic leaders, whose authority rests on elections and transparent governance, MBS operates in a realm that prefers order and citizen welfare above political pluralism. The Saudi state's mission—to safeguard stability, protect its people, and elevate societal well-being—is taking shape without democracy, delivering a quality of life that, by some measures, outstrips Western nations. Still, this progress sits alongside a grim truth: dissent is silenced, and the monarchy's hold remains absolute. MBS's drive to deliver prosperity and opportunity upends the assumption that good governance demands democratic norms, posing thorny questions about the trade-offs between freedom and stability.

Skeptics often attribute Saudi Arabia's prosperity on its finite oil wealth, but Vision 2030 paints a broader picture of calculated diversification. In 2024, non-oil exports hit a record \$137.29 billion—a 13 percent jump from the prior year and a 113 percent leap since 2016—propelled by petrochemicals, plastics, fertilizers, metals, and nascent fields like technology, renewable energy, and agriculture. MBS's strategic investments have fortified the non-oil economy, aiming to boost its GDP share from 40 percent to 65 percent. This shift not only shields the kingdom from the looming decline of oil reserves but also bolsters the monarchy's legitimacy, as a thriving, varied economy underpins the social contract sustaining his rule.

Vision 2030 is a bold roadmap to recast Saudi Arabia as a global economic force while cementing monarchical stability. Born from the need to break oil dependency, it features audacious ventures like NEOM, a \$500 billion futuristic city, and the Red Sea Project, a luxury tourism haven, alongside investments in renewable energy and

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infrastructure. By pushing non-oil GDP growth and targeting foreign direct investment at 5.7 percent of GDP, the plan seeks to position Saudi Arabia into the world's top 15 economies. MBS underscored this vision in a Fox News interview, describing the exceeded targets and new goals for resilience and global competitiveness. —a glimpse of his foresight in seizing untapped potential.

Beyond economics, Vision 2030 doubles as a social pact, locking in the monarchy's legitimacy by meeting the ambitions of Saudi society, especially its youth. Without elections, MBS has woven public wishes into targets like lifting women's workforce participation from 22 percent to 30 percent, doubling UNESCO heritage sites, and increasing household spending on culture and entertainment to 6 percent. Projects like Qiddiya, an entertainment megacity, alongside investments in education and global connectivity, nurture a dynamic society rooted in Islamic values and national pride. By syncing government plans with societal demands, he dampens dissent and bolster authority through inclusive progress.

This blend of opportunity and reform also fortifies MBS's political security, neutralizing threats to the established order. Saudi Arabia's climb from 80th to 20th on the Government Effectiveness Index and a tenfold surge in non-oil revenue signal stronger institutions. Outreach to youth, paired with cultural and economic openings, builds a loyal base less likely to defy the crown. On the global stage, from restarting ties with Iran to forging regional logistics hubs, MBS secures the kingdom's standing, protecting his rule. Vision 2030's promise of prosperity and stability anchors his leadership—both visionary and iron-fisted.

Yet, beneath the sheen of Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia's push to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup lies a human rights crisis that contrasts with its modernizing image. In 2024, the kingdom executed at least 338 people—a precipitous rise from 170 the year before and the highest in decades, per Amnesty International and AFP counts. According to Amnesty International, activists face relentless crackdowns, with arbitrary arrests, unfair trials, and harsh sentences for challenging the regime. Take Muhammad al-Ghamdi, a retired teacher sentenced to death in July 2023 for peaceful online posts, convicted by a Sharia-based court that includes even non-violent critics.

MBS called the al-Ghamdi case “shameful” in a September 2023 Fox News interview, blaming “bad laws” and vowing reform. Yet, as mega-projects and cultural spectacles dominate headlines, reports of executions and stifled freedoms fade. He introduces a state where tradition meets global integration, but persistent harsh penalties hint at a regime chasing acclaim while repressing at home. As global scrutiny increases, these abuses threaten to puncture the kingdom's narrative of progress without accountability.

Saudi Arabia's human rights record clashes with MBS's sweeping social reforms, which have reshaped the cultural landscape while galvanizing conservative pushback. By 2025, women's workforce participation hit 37 percent—overshooting Vision 2030's goal—fueled by curbs on the religious police and new roles in the military. The 2017 anti-corruption purge underscored his resolve to streamline power and modernize governance. But these steps are eclipsed by ongoing abuses—338 executions in 2024, severe sentences for expression—tied to a Sharia judiciary. MBS walks a tightrope, facing resistance from clerics and traditionalists who cling to conservative norms, testing his bid for a progressive yet authoritarian state.

MBS's rule embodies securitization, casting reforms and repression as twin pillars of stability. Vision 2030 tackles existential risks like oil dependency, while executions are framed as shields against dissent. This echoes authoritarian playbooks where security spans narrative control and economic futures.

Can top-down change ignite lasting social shifts without political pluralism? Saudi Arabia mirrors Singapore and China's authoritarian modernization, but its deep cultural conservatism—embedded in courts and society—complicates MBS's vision. Progress without democracy is possible, seen in economic leaps and social openings, yet global watching the executions and silenced voices. Can a nation so skilled at spinning a tale of progress reconcile its ambitions with the hidden toll of those it mutes, or Will MBS's vision always waver between reform and repression, forcing us to confront the uncomfortable reality of the ‘benevolent dictator’?”

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About the author:

Mohammad Javad Mousavizadeh is a Washington, DC-based journalist and analyst specializing in international affairs and foreign policy. He has written on Middle East issues for *The National Interest*, *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, *Daily Sabah*, and *Middle East Monitor*, as well as Iranian outlets such as *Etemad*, *Mardom Salari*, *Shahrvand*, and *Hamdeli*. His insights have been featured by research centers and news agencies, including the Atlantic Council, Russia Today, and Al Jazeera.