



From Sheikhs to Sultanism: statecraft and authority in Saudi Arabia and the UAE

by Christopher M. Davidson, London, Hurst and Company,
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From Sheikhs to Sultanism: statecraft and authority in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, by Christopher M. Davidson, London, Hurst and Company, 2021, 35 pounds (hardback) ISBN: 9781787383937

This book delivers far more than just another contribution to the growing library devoted to the rise to power of Muhammad bin Salman (MBS) in Saudi Arabia and Muhammad bin Zayid (MBZ) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). While its account of their political ascendancy is meticulous and extensively documented, telling that story is not the author's primary concern. Instead, he draws upon their rise to and subsequent exercise of power to exemplify the transition away from "culturally rooted 'sheikhly rule,' in which 'the government and finances of the state were effectively intertwined with the ruling or royal family, but with the *tamimah* (or "paramount") sheikh almost always conferring with a wide range of advisors, relatives, merchants, and tribal allies.' (p. 6). This paradigm along with its upgrading by the addition to sheikhly rule of rentier patrimonialism has become redundant, according to Davidson, as both rulers abandoned consensus politics in their 'rapid intensification of autocratic- authoritarianism' (p. 13). Saudi Arabia and the UAE have, according to him, been transformed into 'post-traditional, highly personalistic autocracies.' (p. 19). Moreover, these ultra- autocratic regimes exemplify a broader 'twenty-first-century strain of 'sultanism,' a concept introduced into political science by Max Weber used to 'describe an extreme form of autocracy distinct from regular patrimonialism or neo-patrimonialism' because 'sultanistic rulers are effectively 'personal chiefs' who 'treat the principal arms of the state as their 'personal instruments' and who are 'beyond any traditional constraints.' (p. 20–21)

Davidson's account thus revives the sultanism concept for the study of Middle East politics from which it had been unwisely discarded primarily because of its alleged 'orientalist' connotations, even though its utility is widely recognized by scholars of other regions. Noting that its application was typically in less developed political economies, Davidson inserts 'advanced' before the UAE and Saudi versions of sultanism, which signals both its relevance in these more sophisticated national settings and its wholehearted embrace of economic development and relative social liberalism.

Having identified the transition from sheikhly rule to advanced sultanism as his focus, Davidson proceeds to detail the challenges and opportunities of conducting research in these authoritarian environments. His 'workaround' strategies included remotely conducted interviews over almost two years with almost one hundred retired administrators, businesspeople, academics and activists. Throughout his ensuing analysis of the mechanisms and consequences of advanced sultanism, he draws upon data gathered in these interviews to supplement the publicly available written record as well as performance rankings of these political economies by international financial institutions, think tanks and other organizations. The thoroughness of his research is suggested by the book's nearly 175 pages of endnotes.

Characteristics of advanced sultanism investigated in detail include the rulers' political patronage networks, dominance over economic affairs, co-optation or marginalization of political and judicial institutions, tightened control over civil society and the media, and most importantly, subordination of all means of coercion to the ruler and his immediate subordinates. In addition to these elements of sultanistic hard power, Davidson investigates MBS's and MBZ's exercise of soft power. After noting that both eschew standard ideologies of their country and region, he chronicles their careful manipulation of established religious and

associated traditions coupled with their outright rejection and suppression of others, most notably Islamism and Wahhabi Islam, along with their purveyors. Coupled with their embrace of religious modernism is their careful cultivation of youth through 'liberal engineering,' a form of outreach that Davidson's limited survey data reveals as being remarkably effective. MBS and MBZ have systematically enhanced both hard and soft power and by so doing transformed sheikhly rule into advanced sultanism.

The purposes to which these sultans' power is put reinforce it while differentiating the advanced sub-type from the broader category of sultanism. In addition, their objectives and relative success in achieving them suggest that advanced sultanism is also a sub-type of the broader category of authoritarian developmentalism, now the principal challenger to democratic market capitalism. An interesting paradox to Davidson is that MBS and MBZ draw not upon expertise from authoritarian developmental states, such as China's, but on westerners when conceiving and implementing designs for their economies and institutions.

Indicators of achievements include rapid advances in human development, including access to education and improved health for women; 'fairly positive overall economic development trajectories' coupled with and largely driven by global economic integration; and increasingly effective control of corruption. These and other gains suggest to Davidson that rentier state building assisted by close relations with the West can be effectively harnessed by 'advanced sultans' in their efforts not only to consolidate their regimes and gain popularity for them, but to propel development.

The closing chapters address the longevity, stability, replication and diffusion of advanced sultanism. Numerous examples of protracted sultanistic rule elsewhere in the world belie the assumption that it is inherently unstable and short-lived. And when sultans are overthrown, other research indicates that it is not by mobilized, popular opposition, but in almost three quarters of cases it is by regime insiders of which military officers are the most common. The notion that economic growth inevitably if gradually creates unstoppable demand for democratization seems as misplaced with regard to Saudi Arabia and the UAE as it did in the case of China. Davidson's survey data reflects the popularity of MBS and MBZ and implies a willingness of Saudis and Emiratis to trade democracy for development. This begs the questions of whether they would continue to do so if development falters, passes them by in favour of the sultan and his cronies, or is perceived as limited to glitzy, showcase projects.

Davidson is sceptical of the export prospects of advanced sultanism. He sees neither a manifest desire on the part of these two exemplars to replicate it in other Middle Eastern countries, nor in most of them—especially other than some GCC neighbours—the required resource endowments or socio-political underpinnings. He does not directly address in detail one obvious possible exception to his general rule, which is Sisi's Egypt. He does not view the relationship with it as one of 'autocracy promotion,' rather one of the 'diffusion of repression' stemming from antipathy towards Islamists and other challenges to allied established orders.


One can argue otherwise. Apart from facilitating his rise to power and then propping up his regime, both MBS and MBZ seem consciously or otherwise to have also provided the Egyptian President a model he is keen to emulate. If one analogizes his reliance on the military to MBS's and MBZ's on tribal loyalties and substitutes for oil rents resource inflows such as overseas development assistance and subsidies for military procurement, bolstered by increasing extractions from his cowed citizens, parallels can be drawn. Sisi has tightened patronage networks, put the military in charge of the economy, co-opted or marginalized political and judicial institutions, subdued civil society, tamed the media, and placed himself and his coterie, including family members, in charge of coercive and control institutions. Admittedly the primary instrument of his power—the military—is not perfectly analogous to a tribe or

coalition of them, but it does seem a reasonable functional substitute. Whether Sisi can sustain a rentier derived advanced sultanism without substantial rents, however, is the real question.

That question is also to be asked of MBS's and MBZ's versions. Davidson does not dwell at length on their future prospects, most notably their capacity to refashion their rentier into 'knowledge' economies to keep pace with declining per capita hydrocarbon rents. What the book overall implies is that these two autocrats have erected substantial regimes with not just thoroughgoing control, but also with capacities to manage their economies, societies and polities. Moreover, the recent record of authoritarian developmental states in general suggests a durability and record of accomplishment of which many liberal democratic states would be proud.

This book, in sum, transcends the tale of two sultans manoeuvring their way into power and then ruthlessly exercising it. It rescues the concept of sultanism from the dustbins of Middle Eastern political analysis and amply demonstrates its unique features and its commonalities with other authoritarian developmental states. As with Davidson's other works, this one is written in clear, even entertaining prose, uncluttered by jargon. It is far and away the best work on these two leaders, the regimes they have created, and the sultanistic version of authoritarian developmental states.

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