Saudi Arabia: the Trial of Sheikh Nimr Al Nimr

As the world remains focused on developments in Iraq and Syria, holding its breath over the global threat which ISIL has come to represent since it grabbed hold of large swathes of lands in the Levant and self-proclaimed the inception of the much abhorred Islamic State, key political developments in Saudi Arabia have almost completely gone amiss.

With the Middle East held hostage by the Islamic State, few have cared to look north to Saudi Arabia and comment on the seemingly inconsequential trial of one Shia cleric, Sheikh Nimr Al Nimr.

But there lies the mistake! This one trial of this one man is bound to reverberate across the region and potentially set alight already simmering sectarian tensions, as through him, Al Saud has condemned any hope for democratic reforms and outlawed Shia Islam as a political paradigm.

It is absolutely crucial to understand at this juncture in time that sheikh Nimr’s political message has never been one of exclusion. While he is a revered Shia cleric, his fight has been for all Saudis as his quest is one of justice, social equality, compassion and tolerance for all.

A cleric, a scholar, a right activist and a politician, Sheikh Al Nimr has for well over a decade been most vocal in his critic of Saudi Arabia absolute Sunni monarchy, unafraid to challenge the authorities or call for a more inclusive socio-political system where all Saudis, all faith confounded, would enjoy equal rights and responsibilities. Most of all Sheikh Al Nimr has sought to end Saudi Arabia’s reactionary stance, urging King Abdullah to see in his subjects not a threat but an opportunity for harmonious growth.

Such calls for peaceful change and civil equalities were met by systematic oppression and repression.

Since Saudi Arabia’s Wahhabs simply could not tolerate the cornerstone of what they fear would become a Shia uprising to be laid at the heart of Sunni Islam dominion, the opposition had to be crushed, all so-called dissidents had to be silenced. It is this paranoiac fear, this irrational hatred of Shia Islam which has led Al Saud to push forth the sectarian card and manipulate its public into believing that the opposition aimed to lay waste Sunni Islam, thus justifying its heavy-handed repression campaigns against law-abiding citizens.

As Sheikh Nimr refused to cower before tyranny, so determined he was to stand for those who could not or dare not, Al Saud sought to extinguish his light. And so began his trial.

And so began the trial of Sheikh Al Nimr’s condemnation to death is but a symptom of the kingdom’s crusade to crush Shia Islam, its attempt to put a definite stop to progress and brand change a heresy against the powerful house of Al Saud. But it is also to be understood as a negation of people’s most inherent rights. An absolute monarchy which suffers no criticism and recognizes its subjects no rights, whether human or civil, Saudi Arabia has made its message clear – objection to its rule will be punished by death, wherever and whenever it is expressed.

But as often in a state where repression has become the main institutional axis, the opposition needs only to find one rallying cry, one pivotal moment where the collective’s fear of persecution is overcome to turn one movement into a
revolutionary storm. While 2011 provided the latter by exploding the shackles which burdened millions of Arabs across the Middle East, Saudi Arabia needed still for its revolutionary spirit to come alive. As it stands, Sheikh Al Nimr could become that impetus Saudis have been waiting for to focus their frustrations on and carry their hopes.

A smouldering revolutionary pit, the eastern province of Qatif has seen too many of its sons and daughters pay the ultimate price for their dreams of freedom to bear the crucifixion of Sheikh Al Nimr in silence.

With over 30,000 political prisoners currently sitting in Al Saud penitentiaries, many have come to realise that it is Saudi Arabia’s very oppressive narrative which in the end will be its undoing. By banking on its citizens’ fear to impose and assert their rule, Al Saud royals are simply not equipped to deal with courage and blind political convictions.

If Al Saud has been keen to portray the kingdom as an oasis of calm and stability in comparison to the tumult and bloodshed which has swept through the Middle East, it could well be that such calm will stand a prelude to a voracious uprising, one which drive has already found an echo across the entire region. With an irony which only history can provide, one cannot help but ponder over the symmetry which has arisen in between Saudi Arabia 2014 and Iran 1979. While Iran found its catalyst in the return of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the subsequent furious repressive deluge which befall the Iranian nation, Al Saud stands to transform a Shia cleric’s calls for reforms into a vengeful cry for retribution against not only the monarchy but Sunni rule.

It is crucial to understand that while Sheikh Al Nimr’s actions in Saudi Arabia have been politically motivated, Saudi Arabia’s answer came by way of religious repression, thus fanning sectarian sentiment and hatred. Because his campaign has been focused on the right of one community to exercise its religious freedom in peace, a plight which Shia Muslims in Bahrain, Lebanon, Yemen, Kuwait, Syria and Iraq have identified to, Sheikh Al Nimr has come to embody Shia Islam’s plight for freedom, acceptance and recognition. But Sunni Muslims have to find a deep resonance in Sheikh Nimr’s message as its called to their deep-seated yearning for strong and fair leadership as well as brotherhood.

Sheikh Al Nimr’s sentencing could further drive a wedge in the region at a time when sectarian tensions have reached a dangerous intensity, thus promoting instability and dissidence. More troubling yet, the Islamic State could actually understand Saudi Arabia’s move against Al Nimr, as a nod of approval towards its own religious cleansing campaign and crusade against all Shias in Syria and Iraq.

A polarizing religious and political figure both within and without Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Al Nimr’s religious standing, his position as an outspoken Shia cleric has unified the Saudi opposition under one banner; a development Al Sauds have failed to fully assess, so disengage they have been from their people.

The Martin Luther King of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Al Nimr’s brutal death is likely to give birth to an insurrection movement which magnitude will stretch far beyond the kingdom borders and act a domino effect to Sunni monarchies across the Arabian Peninsula.

Looking back Al Sauds might just realise that this one “insignificant” man, would by his death, signal the end of Ibn Saud’s monarchical legacy.

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