The Saudi revolution begins

Muhammad bin Salman could transform the Arab and Islamic world for the better. How to ensure he succeeds

ONE Saudi cleric thundered that letting women drive would lead to immorality and a lack of virgins. Another declared that women were incapable of taking the wheel because they were half-brained. Still another drew on science, ruling that driving would damage their ovaries. Such tosh is at last being cast aside. On June 24th Saudi women will be allowed to drive their cars. That is one step towards emancipation; among the others must be an end to male "guardianship", for example, in deciding women can study or travel abroad. Yet getting women behind the wheel is a welcome blow against the idea that Islamic piety is best shown by repressing them.

Female drivers are the most visible aspect of a social revolution, one brought about not from the streets but the palace of Muhammad bin Salman, the crown prince. Cinemas have opened; music is performed in public; the killjoy morality police are off the streets. Social liberalisation is part of the crown prince's ambition to wean the economy away from oil. But as our special report sets out, his changes come with more authoritarianism at home, and recklessness abroad. The world must hope that the bold prince triumphs over the brutish one.

Can't buy me love

Saudi Arabia is uniquely disliked by Westerners of all political stripes. They are appalled by its sharia punishments and mistreatment of women, and scared by its Wahhabi form of Islam, which has fed gruesome jihadist ideologies such as that of Islamic State. Despite the kingdom's wealth, businessmen would rather work in freewheeling Dubai than Riyadh. Fellow Arabs often deride Saudis as rich, lazy and arrogant.

Yet the world has a vital interest in Saudi Arabia's fate. It is the biggest oil exporter, and home to Islam's two holiest sites. It is central to the Gulf, the Arab region and the Islamic world. Successful reforms would help spread stability to a region in chaos, and dynamism to its economies. A more normal Saudi Arabia should moderate the Islamic world, by example and because the flow of petrodollars to zealots would slow. Failure, by contrast, could spread turmoil to the Gulf, which broadly avoided the upheaval of the Arab spring of 2011.

It is thus worrying that Saudi Arabia faces such daunting problems. Volatile oil revenues make up more than 80% of government income, the IMF reckons. Even with rising crude prices, the country is grappling with a large budget deficit. For all the gains in health and education, GDP per person has been flat for decades. Saudis work mostly in cushy government jobs. Oil wealth has hidden a woefully unproductive economy, and fuelled Islamic ultra-puritanism around the world.

To his credit, Prince Muhammad recognises that change is needed. However, he is unnecessarily adding to his task. Abroad, he has proved rash. His war against the Houthis, a Shia militia in Yemen—now centred on the battle for the port of Hodeida—has brought disease and hunger to Yemenis, a missile war over Saudi cities and embarrassment to Western allies that provide weapons and other help. Last year Saudi Arabia sullied itself by detaining the Lebanese prime minister, Saad Hariri, releasing him only under international pressure. With its main ally, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), it has led the way in isolating Qatar, a contrarian emirate, by cutting land, sea and air links (the Saudis even want to dig a canal to make the place an island). In doing so they have split the Gulf Co-operation Council, the club of oil monarchies. As the Arab cold war spreads, Iran and other foes are gaining advantage.

At home Prince Muhammad has developed a taste for repression. The number of executions has risen. More dissenters are in jail, among them, perversely, women who campaigned to drive. Everything, it seems, must be a gift from the Al Sauds: the name of the country, the oil bounty and now the right to drive a car. He has also adopted the view that all Islamists, even the non-violent offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood, are as grave a menace as Sunni jihadists and Shia militias. Thus, the Saudis and Emiratis are leading a counter-revolution against the Arab spring and the hope of democracy. Sadly, America has all but given them carte blanche.

And the crown prince's effort to boost the private sector is strangely centralised. Even the promotion of entertainment is run by a government agency. His focus on "giga-projects", notably plans to build NEOM, a futuristic city in the north-west with separate laws, looks mega-risky. Previous attempts to carve out copycat versions of Dubai, the business and tourism hub in the UAE, have been a disappointment. The King Abdullah Financial District in Riyadh stands almost empty.

Instead of planning a dream city, the crown prince should aim to make all of Saudi Arabia a bit more like Dubai—open to the world, friendly to business, efficiently run, socially liberal, religiously tolerant and, above all, governed by a predictable system of laws. His decision to lock up hundreds of tycoons, officials and princes arbitrarily in a gilded Saudi hotel last year in an "anti-corruption campaign" frightened investors.

He should also study the UAE's federalism. The loose union of seven emirates in 1971 may be unique, but a country as large and diverse as Saudi Arabia has much to gain from devolving power. It would let different parts of the country express their identities more freely and adapt religious rules to their traditions—more relaxed in Jeddah, more strict inland in Riyadh and allowing more space for Shias in the east. It would also permit experimentation with economic reforms. Above all, it could lead to forms of local representation.

Crowning success

In carrying out his transformation, Prince Muhammad is weakening the old pillars of Al Saud rule—the princes, the clerics and the businessmen. Democracy can help him build a new base of legitimacy. The crown prince could turn his popularity among the young and women into a political force. That would help him in what is likely to be a long reign once he becomes king. Right now, he is on the road to becoming another Arab strongman. As the Arab spring showed, autocracy is brittle. Better to become a new sort of Arab monarch: one who treats his people as citizens, not subjects. ■