

Saudi Students Seize the Day: The Beginning of a Cultural Revolution

On the night of the 27th November 2006, while millions of Saudis were sleeping, a handful of students in the capital unknowingly started a cultural revolution. Life imitated art when a stage play, “Wasati Bila Wasatiya” (A Moderate without Moderation) at Al Yamamah, an international college in Riyadh, triggered a violent confrontation between the Islamic religious police, the Mutawa and hundreds of students, ex-patriate teachers, actors and audience members. As cinemas and theatres in Saudi Arabia are outlawed this was the first time that a theatrical production exploring contemporary social issues was ever shown. The onstage struggle resulted in props being destroyed, lights smashed and actors battered. A firearm was discharged with live ammunition. The play was about social change in the kingdom.

Heavily armed government special forces carrying Kalashnikovs stormed the college auditorium and apprehended dozens of the ultra conservative Islamic protesters who disrupted the event and seized their cache of weapons and vehicles. The play subsequently received royal support with the Governor of Riyadh, HRH Prince Salman Ibn Abdul Aziz Al-Saud requesting to attend a special presentation of the college production. Hundreds of students also signed letters of support for their beleaguered college president, Ahmed M. Al-Eisa who resisted petitions and calls to resign. The parents of students also mobilized to support the college through social networks, business relationships and public advocacy. Within a few days Arab newspapers, Reuters and the New York Times reported on the incident.

“I felt so proud that I was a member of the play. In fact, I had the feeling for two reasons. First, because I was working with responsible students, who believed in the message they were trying to send. The second reason was because we were trying to send this critical message for the first time in Saudi Arabia” said one member of the cast and crew.

While the government shut down the college intranet preventing students from discussing the incident, throughout the region Arab news websites and internet discussion forums were inundated with emails. Many of the Mutawa-backed websites posted photographs of the president of the college identifying him as an enemy of Islam. In the prominent Arab newspaper Al-Riyadh, writer Abdul Aziz Al-Zukair criticized the incident at Al-Yamamah College mocking the heroics of the students and lamented the absence of respect for the opinions of the Islamic conservatives present in the audience on the night of the incident.

Other websites reportedly made threats of reprisals against the faculty and staff of the college. Ex-patriate teachers from Australia, United Kingdom, New Zealand, Canada, America and Europe while expressing concerns about their security demonstrated their



support for the students by showing interest in attending the show when it resumed a few days later. Many mosques across the city condemned the college and its cultural week activities.

In a lecture before school principals, Mohammad Al Nojaimi, a prominent Islamic jurist and member of the Islamic Fiqh Council responsible for interpreting matters of Islamic jurisprudence and extracting religious rulings on practical issues, singled out certain writers and apostate scholars “for making non-believers out of everyone”. He called them traitors who are on the payrolls of foreign governments. “I suspect they have links with foreign embassies – I didn’t want to say this but Prince Naif (Saudi Minister of Interior) said it too”

“We are afraid of nobody” said the president of Al-Yamamah College in an interview with another Arab newspaper Al-Hayat and stated that the college would continue to develop and promote its cultural programs. A week after the original incident the stage play was shown again in the same auditorium. Ominously, two bullet holes from a firearm discharged during the opening night of the play a week earlier were still clearly visible in the high ceiling.

Following a long, rousing musical score in the darkened college auditorium the first scene of a young man entwined in a rope and being pulled left and right was greeted with triumphant, rapturous applause and cheers from hundreds of Arab students and guests. The two worlds the provincial student inhabited – the traditional Islamic culture of his family and village and the modern graffiti-splashed Western-metro scene of his new friends – formed the stage backdrop. It was against this milieu that the young student fought to find his place as his village friends armed themselves with semi-automatic rifles and suicide bombs for a looming Jihad while his city friends found freedom of expression in English, tolerance of homosexuality and reveled in Western clothing and music. Tragically, the student collapsed in the no-man’s land between the two worlds under the strain of the cultural tug-of-war.

Saudi Arabia is a country in transition. Under the sands of its vast deserts Islam and secularism are grinding together like two monumental tectonic plates. Outwardly, almost every aspect of life in Saudi Arabia is governed by Islamic laws and customs. For example, all Saudi men are cloaked in the white *thobe* while women are covered by the *abaya*. There are strict rules preventing men and women from being together in public places. Before dawn the first calls to prayer are made from powerful loudspeakers on mosques and continue intermittently throughout the day while businesses cease to operate, shops close and streets are emptied of people and vehicles. However, inwardly a new voice is being heard.

While the Saudi government has been preoccupied with the implementation of its Saudization program effectively reducing the number of foreign workers in the kingdom, Saudi college students have been listening to podcasts on the BBC, defying strict national

Saudi censorship restrictions and downloading the latest international films and communicating with each other using the Bluetooth network on their mobile phones. They eschew the ten hours of compulsory Islamic studies and instead share the latest music files, place orders with Amazon.com, watch satellite television and seek to form relationships with foreign nationals and expatriates. They spend the summer in New York, Paris and London where they improve their English and see a world beyond the old fortress walls of Riyadh.

The Arab world for Saudis is polarized between the excesses of Dubai and the rigorous asceticism of Riyadh. The theme of the play - the conflict between Islam and secularism - revealed how fractured and shifting Saudi culture really is. Ideally, many Saudis would like to find something in between. This cultural dissonance has survived because the Saudis have two lives – a public life and a private life and all the heavy, carved wooden doors of Riyadh ensure the two never meet. However, this may soon change as there are rumors that the stage play ‘Wasati Bila Wasatiya’ may be adapted to Saudi television and broadcast nationally.

Act one has finished. Act two is about to begin.

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