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The first democratic local elections in Saudi Arabia in 2005

Electoral rules, the mobilization of voters and the Islamist landslide

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During the summer and autumn of 2004 Dr Kraetzschmar led the LSE Public Policy Group work in Riyadh on helping Saudi Arabian and international law firms advise the KSA Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs about the design of Saudi Arabia's first democratic local elections, which were held in the following year. Here he reflects on the policy choices made by the government on how the elections were organized, the processes by which voters unfamiliar with democratic politics were mobilized to take part in the process, and the outcomes of the election successfully held in 2005.

Whilst a vast body of literature covers electoral systems in advanced democracies, it is only recently that scholars of Middle Eastern politics have begun to examine more systematically the formation and effects of electoral rules in Arab autocracies. Indeed, not all that long ago electoral systems were conspicuous by their absence as objects of enquiry in the comparative politics of the region. While there has been some research on electoral rules and electoral cooperation in party-based elections, as yet there has been no such analysis of non-partisan contests.

This study of the 2005 municipal council elections in Saudi Arabia thus contributes to the emergent debate on Arab electoral politics by demonstrating that not only is there a discernable connection between electoral design and the composition of Arab legislatures, but also between the types of electoral provisions in place and the behaviour of politicians and voters during an election campaign.

Specifically, the Saudi case demonstrates that, by putting a premium on cross-district efforts at voter mobilization, the electoral system provided the institutional backdrop against which it was possible for Islamist candidates and their backers to coordinate successfully their campaigns and achieve impressive victories across the Kingdom. It also posits that it was this level of coordination, facilitated by the electoral rules, that gave the entire campaign a distinctly ideological flavour, even though the elections were formally run on a non-partisan, individual-candidacy basis.

Background
Saudi Arabia is a latecomer in the region to the game of electoral politics. Whilst most Arab countries introduced plural elections in the 1980s and 1990s as part of limited efforts at political liberalization, it was only in 2004 that the Saudi government decided the electoral principle was after all compatible with the notions of monarchical and clerical rule: the twin pillars of political authority in the Kingdom
(Yamani 2009, pp. 90–95).1 At the time, the decision to convoke elections was driven by growing domestic disquiet over the lack of citizen involvement in politics, as well as by a desire to shed the regime's post-9/11 image abroad of a 'closed and secretive society' that fosters Islamic extremism (Al-Rasheed 2009, p. 591, Kapiszewski 2006b, pp. 463–466).

By introducing limited, partial and non-partisan elections at the lowest tier of government, the Saudi authorities killed two birds with one stone. For one, in the short-term they successfully quelled questions about the reform willingness of the Saudi regime, which had grown ever more persistent in the aftermath of 9/11. By the same token, however, they managed to create an electoral experience that, whilst offering full male citizen participation, contained in-built safeguards against any erosion of the monarchy's absolutist power. This was achieved by bestowing the newly created councils with only limited powers to shape local affairs and with no constitutional prerogatives whatsoever to influence the conduct of national politics, which remains concentrated in the hands of the King, his government, the royal family more broadly and the official *ulam* (Al-Rasheed 2009). By allowing elections for only half of all council seats, the authorities furthermore ensured that 'undesirable' election outcomes could, if needed, be corrected through the appointment of loyal councillors and mayors.

Alliance opportunities in the Saudi voting system
Drafted in 2004, the Saudi municipal election law regulates the elections to the country's 178 councils, which range in size from fourteen seats in the larger urban centres to four seats in the smallest (rural) municipalities. As mentioned above, according to the election law, half of the council members are directly elected by male adult suffrage, while the other half and all mayors are appointed by the government. For instance, this meant that in cities such as Riyadh, Jeddah, Mecca, Medina and al-Damm m only seven of the fourteen council seats were filled through competitive elections in 2005. In terms of voting system, the Saudi election law carries many of the trademarks of simple plurality (SP) in single-member districts (SMD), but also contains distinct design features that are unique by international standards. Political hopefuls seeking to contest the local elections are required to register their candidacy in single-member districts and voters cast their ballots for individual candidates and not for (party) lists. Moreover, a candidate is elected to the council if he wins a plurality of the votes cast for all candidates standing in his district. The difference to SP in SMD is, however, that the Saudi electoral system draws a rather unusual distinction between 'nomination' and 'voting' areas. In plurality–majoritarian electoral systems elsewhere, voters are usually required to vote for a candidate in the district in which they are registered. This is the case, for instance, in the United Kingdom, Canada and India. In the Saudi case, however, voters are asked to cast their ballot not only for a candidate in the 'nomination district' in which they reside, but also for candidates in all the other nomination districts of the municipality.

The stipulation that voters can cast as many ballots as there are districts in the municipality has serious ramifications for both the *quality* and the *conduct* of elections in Saudi Arabia. To begin with, it creates a complex-looking ballot paper in the largest cities, as my example in Figure 1 below shows.

Second, the KSE design violates a key design principle of plurality/majoritarian systems, namely mandating a direct link between constituents and elected representatives in a given geographic area, also known as 'geographic accountability'. Indeed, although it is possible under the current Saudi provisions to win a seat based on a plurality of votes cast within the nomination district, it is equally conceivable for candidates to win the seat without actually having secured most votes in their home district. That is, candidates can be elected in a nomination district even though they have not been the first choice of local residents in that area.

A simple example of this process is presented in Table 1 below. In this hypothetical scenario, four contestants stand in District 1. Amongst them, Candidate A clearly wins a plurality of votes in his home constituency. Under ordinary circumstances he should thus have been awarded the district seat. Given the Saudi voting system, however, it is Candidate B who carries the seat, despite the fact he received far fewer votes than Candidate A in his nomination district.

Figure 1. A ballot paper for the Jeddah municipal election (showing the candidate lists for Districts 1 and 2 out of a total of seven such lists).

Table 1. A hypothetical election outcome under the Saudi Arabian voting system, in a municipality with 4 component districts.

	Candidate A	Candidate B	Candidate C	Candidate D
District 1 (home)	17,000	14,000	8,000	5,500
District 2	8,000	10,200	5,700	2,300
District 3	6,500	9,000	7,500	1,800
District 4	7,700	11,500	1,900	200
Total number of votes	**39,200**	**44,700**	**23,100**	**9,800**

Campaign strategies and electoral pacts
While the voting system provided strong incentives for vote-maximizing candidates to cooperate across nomination districts in order to stand out in a crowded field of contestants (in some Riyadh districts there were well above 100 candidates), the election regulations prohibited candidates from forming electoral alliances or cooperating in any other form with one another, even if others shared a similar political outlook and agenda. They also mandated that candidates focus on those issues falling within the remit of the local councils only, thus prohibiting any discussion of national level politics (Hassan 2004, *Saudi Gazette* 2005).

To avoid the ire of the Saudi electoral commission, and the possibility of being disqualified from the polls, the instigators of electoral cooperation therefore ensured that the pacts they forged between contestants remained *informal* and *secretive* affairs. The only evidence for these pacts indeed existing, and that they played a critical role in the election campaign, stems from respondent interviews and eyewitness accounts in the press, which reported widely on the behind-the-scenes alliances that were forged by individual candidates and by other societal forces, and the usage made by some of these forces of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) to advance certain slates of candidates.

More than any other societal force in the Kingdom, the moderate Islamist current thus understood the complexities of the voting system and calibrated its electioneering tactics accordingly. Although hard to verify, it is also widely assumed that this Islamist brand of Muslim clerics was behind the thousands of SMS messages that were sent (often repeatedly and right up to polling day) to voters in cities across the Kingdom, promoting said slates of contestants. Publically dubbed at the time as the 'golden' or 'recommended' lists, these text messages typically contained the names of 'approved' candidates alongside statements along the lines of 'These are the candidates who follow the principles and line of the Prophet Muhammad. If you want the better for our Islamic and Arab society, vote for them.' By forging electoral lists, they not only skilfully appealed to voters overwhelmed by the sheer number of candidates to choose from – who in many instances would not have been known to them – but also were able to mobilize their supporters around a fixed slate of candidates, thus avoiding a possible 'fragmentation of the Islamist vote' (Menoret 2005, p. 4).

Electoral outcomes
Aside from their impact on the election campaign, the pacts forged in 2005 are also thought to have affected the election results themselves, particularly in the metropolitan areas of the Kingdom. Probably the most pertinent evidence available in support of this assertion is the stunning victories of Islamist candidates in the capital Riyadh, the Eastern cities of al-Damm m and al-Qa f, the Western municipalities of Jeddah, Mecca, Medina and al- if, and the northern city of Tab k, where they managed to capture most, and in some cases even all, of the elective municipal council seats. As it turns out, all the winners had featured on the text messages sent out to voters in the various cities, which suggests that this particular campaigning device may indeed have influenced voter

choices and helped consolidate the Islamist vote (Al-Salti and Qusti 2005, Al-Matrafi 2005b, Ahmad and Muhammad 2005).

Beyond this circumstantial evidence, it is difficult, however, to ascertain precisely to what extent these Islamist candidates won due to the clerical support they received and/or their appearances on these 'golden' lists, as there were no exit polls and it is impossible to obtain a breakdown of election results by nomination districts. Nonetheless, some useful insights can be gained from the available results, all of which point towards a possible link between electoral pacts and Islamist victories. For one, the results show that most of the winning candidates captured significantly more votes than there were voters in their respective nomination district, which means they were all highly successful in mobilizing electoral support from across other constituencies. As illustrated in Table 2, in Jeddah, for instance, even the winner with the overall lowest vote tally (8090 votes) was able to garner significantly more votes than there were voters in his district. If the estimates are accurate, he was able to secure at the very least 4290 votes from across the other nomination districts, if not more, given that it is unlikely for him to have had a 100% success rate in his home constituency.

The picture was similar in Riyadh and Medina, where again the vote totals obtained by the winning candidates exceeded the number of voters in their respective nomination districts, and this for the most part by very large margins. The results in Jeddah and elsewhere furthermore reveal that overall the winners won by incredibly wide margins, which few of the runners-up were able to approximate. In Jeddah itself the gap separating winner from runner-up stood across the board in the thousands and not in the hundreds of votes.

Taken together, both these observations make evident just how vastly superior the winning candidates were in their capacity for electoral mobilization, and suggest that the electoral pacts forged by prominent moderate Islamist clerics and scholars, and their skilful appeal to voters' religious sentiments, all played their part in securing the cross-constituency support necessary to pull-off election victory; a success which the 'liberal' current in Saudi politics was unable to rival.

Conclusion
In 2004, the Saudi government opted for the introduction of an electoral system that is not only highly unusual by the standards of international comparison, but also clearly advantages candidates with broad electoral appeal and/or organizational backing over those with more localized bases of support. This design choice had serious repercussions for the dynamics and outcome of the municipal elections in 2005. It also provided the institutional backdrop against which it was possible for the moderate Islamist current
      (a) to mobilize voters around fixed slates of candidates; and
      (b) to inject a strong moral/ideological undertone into the election campaign.
In so doing, it facilitated the remarkable victories of its affiliates at the ballot box.

Table 2: The results of the Jeddah municipal election

Nomination District	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th
Estimated average number of voters	3,800	3,800	3,800	3,800	3,800	3,800	3,800
Total number of candidates	47	119	111	80	26	67	78
Total number of votes for the winner	10,269	9,463	8,090	9,399	10,925	11,481	11,905
…as a percentage of the total number of votes cast	39.7	38.1	29.9	38.0	46.1	44.3	51.1
Total number of votes for the runner-up	5,773	1,802	2,885	2,648	5,533	5,007	1,256
Total number of votes for the third-placed candidate	764	798	2069	1,010	1,390	1,186	780
Approximate total number of votes cast	**25,868**	**24,802**	**26,989**	**24,680**	**23,724**	**25,926**	**23,294**

Note: The estimated averages here are based on the largest number of votes cast in one of the seven nomination districts. In the Jeddah municipal council elections, this was district 3, in which a total of 26,989 votes were cast.

Whether the Saudi authorities anticipated these design effects is hard to establish. Some of the respondents interviewed for this study asserted that the government purposefully designed the local electoral rules so as to advantage certain groups in society. They hold that because the government was reluctant to liberalize, it hoped to produce a victory for 'anti-Western' forces – an outcome that would significantly reduce international appetite for demanding further reform moves in the Kingdom.

About the author

Dr Hendrik Jan Kraetzschmar is Lecturer in the Comparative Politics of the Middle East and North Africa in the Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies division at the University of Leeds, where he began work in autumn 2007. Before that for two years he lectured in Middle East Politics at the American University in Cairo. His PhD analysed electoral systems in the Mahgreb and Egypt and was completed in the Department of Government at the London School of Economics and Political Science. During the summer and autumn of 2004 Dr Kraetzschmar led the LSE Public Policy Group work on helping Saudi Arabian and international law firms advise the KSA Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs on the design of the first democratic local elections in the following year.

Dr Kraetzschmar has published academic articles and book chapters on many aspects of politics and elections across north Africa and the Arab world. He has jointly edited (with J. Schwarzmantel), *Democracy and Violence: Global Challenges and Local Debates* (London: Routledge, 2011, forthcoming).

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