

## **Strong leadership is more necessary than ever!**

Dennis Sammut\*

In Europe these days you often hear about the lack of strong political leadership, and the absence of visionaries among those who hold positions of power. Angela Merkel is for many the last of the political giants, and even she these days sometimes looks like a shrinking violet. Often it is in times of crisis that leaders emerge and come into their own. Take Winston Churchill. If it was not for World War II history would probably not have judged him kindly. Some of his decisions in the early days of his political career were hugely controversial, but his leadership during the battle against nazism and fascism earned him the admiration of the world and made him a historical giant. Former German Chancellor Willy Brandt on the other hand did not fight any wars, but he was the one who had the vision to stop one. His leadership helped start the process to bring about the end of the Cold War – even though it was others who eventually finished it. His name comes up often these days as Europe tries to understand how it is going to chart its future.

In the Arab region leadership is often lacking. There are plenty of despots and petty dictators but few visionaries. In recent history Sheikh Zayed of Abu Dhabi comes to mind as a wise and visionary leader. Had it not been for him the present day UAE would not have existed. The same can be said about King Abdulaziz ibn Saud, the founder of Saudi Arabia. He too forged a country out of many disparate pieces.

What has kept Saudi Arabia together since Ibn Saud founded it in 1932 has been the traditional bond between the al Saud family and the people. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this bond was starting to look a bit tired. Young people particularly were hugely disenchanted by the inertia that ran throughout Saudi society. Continued stagnation could easily have led to the sort of dramatic collapse that we have seen elsewhere, with very serious consequences constituting a threat not only to the al Saud family but to the nation itself, and in many respects to the whole Middle East. In Saudi Arabia change could only come from two quarters: from the religious establishment with very unpredictable consequences, or from the ruling family itself. The emergence of

Mohammed bin Salman as the standard bearer for change, for many did not come a moment too soon.

With the al Saud clan now including more than ten thousand members, with different personalities and factions, it looks from the outside more like a political party than a family. Renewing the bond between the ruling al Saud family and the people has been the biggest challenge that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has had to address since he assumed the role of heir to the throne. If Mohammed bin Salman sometimes appears as a man in a hurry this is because he, as many others do, must realise that the major social and economic reforms on which he has embarked were long overdue, and that the window to implement change was actually narrow. Neither the country's economy, nor its demographic and social fabric could endure more of the same for much longer.

The reforms which Mohammed bin Salman has initiated have stopped the rot, not by using oil revenues to patch up problems as had been the norm, but by actually initiating a deep process of renewal. The previous anachronistic situation was not sustainable, and was creating huge disenchantment amongst big chunks of the Saudi population, especially the youth.

That is why the changes of the last two or three years have solid popular support, especially amongst the youth and amongst the educated classes in Saudi Arabia. Any politician will tell you that social changes are the ones that are most difficult to implement since they go to the core of society. The emancipation of women has been one of the more challenging of Mohammed bin Salman's reforms. This was not some abstract decision of foreign policy important only to the elite but went right to the heart of every Saudi tribe or family. What for many in the west looked like the inevitable, for some in Saudi Arabia was the unthinkable.

As happens in every country where reforms are introduced, change inevitably ruffles the feathers of those with entrenched and vested interests. Step-by-step reforms are not as destructive as revolutions, yet the more meaningful they are the more they are likely to provoke a reaction. And here strong leadership is necessary. Any leader who is squeamish at the first sign of opposition to the changes he is trying to introduce is not worth the name. In

Saudi Arabia, the entrenched forces with vested economic interests are deep rooted, and they have been putting up a stiff resistance to change. They span across the religious establishment, the bureaucracy, and yes even in parts of the royal family, and they are neither benign, nor liberal, nor enlightened.

Mohammed bin Salman has been pushing through his reform agenda with determination. He does not have too much time, yet he is also learning that justification of the cause does not give him a carte blanche on the methods he uses to achieve it. As every leader soon finds out this is a fine balancing act. He will have plenty of opportunity in the future to prove the extent of his own vision and enlightenment, and he too will have a choice between building a Saudi society based on authoritarianism or one that is based on consensus. Yet for the moment it is right that he should push ahead with the reforms that he has started, and to deliver on what many Saudis want and expect.

*\*Dennis Sammut, Director of LINKS (Dialogue, Analysis and Research) and a long-time observer and commentator on Gulf affairs*

