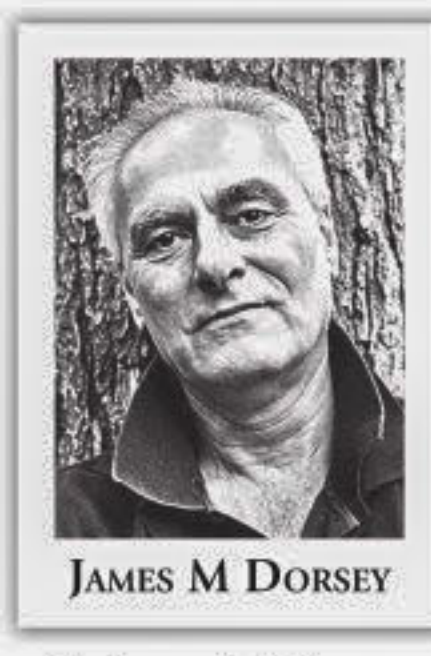


Clerics and entertainment seek to bolster Saudi prince's grip on power



JAMES M DORSEY

A public apology by a prominent Salafi scholar sheds light on Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman's version of "moderate Islam", his effort to shape the Middle East and North Africa in his mould, and the replacement of religion with hyper-nationalism as the source of his legitimacy.

Claiming to speak in the name of the Sahwa or Awakening movement, Aidh al-Qarni, one of the kingdom's most popular religious scholars, broke with the Muslim Brotherhood-linked group's past call for political reform and instead wholeheartedly endorsed Prince Mohammed's undefined notion of an Islam that would be free of extremism.

"I would like to apologise to Saudi society for...the extremism, the violation of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, the violation of the tolerance of Islam, the violation of the moderate and merciful nature of Islam. I support today the moderate and open-to-the-world Islam that has been called for by crown prince Mohammed bin Salman," Mr Al-Qarni said, wearing a Salafi-style chequered red-and-white headdress.

More than simply a declaration of support for the Saudi leader, Mr Al-Qarni's apology provided ideological justification for Prince Mohammed's so far only partially successful efforts to ensure that regional states are ruled by governments of his liking, refusal to condemn assaults on Islam like in China's north-western province of Islam, and crackdown at home that potentially has put some of his past colleagues on death row.

Mr Al-Qarni was not among Islamic scholars that have been detained, many of them in a crackdown in September 2017. Those arrested and potentially facing

execution included some of the kingdom's other most popular reformist preachers such as Salman al-Audah and Mr Al-Qarni's namesake, Awad al-Qarni.

Charges against the two men, as well as author and broadcaster Ali al-Omari, include stirring public discord, inciting people against the ruler, public support for imprisoned dissidents and alleged ties to the Brotherhood and Qatar. A Saudi-United Arab Emirates-led alliance has been boycotting Qatar economically and diplomatically for the past two years.

Mr Al-Omari, a former United Nations Goodwill Ambassador for Youth and Humanity, is a member of the Qatar-based International Union of Muslim Scholars founded by controversial scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Mr Al-Qaradawi is widely believed to be a major spiritual influence within the Brotherhood.

Mr Al-Qarni's endorsement of Prince Mohammed and reports that two of his colleagues may be executed came as Human Rights Watch rang alarm bells about the fate of Murtaja Qureiris, an 18-year-old who could face a similar fate.

Mr Qureiris was arrested when he was 13 for participating in 2011 in a bike protest in eastern Saudi Arabia three years earlier when he was 10 years old. He was charged with belonging to a terrorist group, helping to construct Molotov cocktails, shooting at security forces and participating in a protest at the funeral of his brother, who was killed in an allegedly violent demonstration.

Mr Al-Qarni didn't do his former colleagues any favours by asserting that Qatar was funding Saudi scholars. "Of course, people get money... Saudis went there (Qatar)," Mr Al-Qarni said, refusing to identify who he was referring to.

Meanwhile, a TV series broadcast during this year's Ramadan, when programmes get their highest ratings, provided background music for Mr Al-Qarni's apology.

Rewriting history through the eyes of a



Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Saudi family, Al-Asouf (Winds of Change) blames the Sahwa for some of the region's most momentous events, including the 1979 Iranian revolution, the occupation by militants of the Grand Mosque in Mecca that same year, and the 1981 assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat because of his signing of a peace treaty with Israel.

In line with Prince Mohammed's assertion that Saudi Arabia embraced a more moderate form of Islam prior to the events of 1979, Al-Asouf suggests that Sahwa's ultra-conservatism bolstered by its hostility towards the West, misogynist attitudes towards women and intolerance, influenced a generation of Saudis.

Adding to Mr Al-Qarni's apology and Al-Asouf's messaging, Adil al-Kalbani, a former imam of the Grand Mosque and often straight-talking member of the kingdom's ultra-conservative religious establishment, who has seven million followers on Twitter,

made a 180 degrees U-turn on his past statements that supported severe restrictions of women's rights and denounced Shiites as apostates.

Challenging one of the kingdom's major taboos, Mr Al-Kalbani denounced gender segregation in mosques as "a kind of phobia," arguing that in the era of the Prophet Mohammed, men and women prayed together.

"Now unfortunately, we've become paranoid to the level that in a mosque, a place of worship, it's as if women are in a fortress," he said. "They're completely isolated from the men, not seeing or hearing them except through microphones or speakers."

Drawing red lines, Mr Al-Qarni sought to provide religious justification to Prince Mohammed's policies. The crown prince's concept of moderate Islam, involving absolute obedience to the ruler, was one red line. The interests of Saudi Arabia as defined by Prince Mohammed was another.

"I went and pledged allegiance to the King and swore on the Qur'an and the Sunnah. I went on the night of the 27th (of May) to Mecca and pledged allegiance to Mohammed bin Salman. You pledge allegiance for better or for worse... I declare here that I am now one of the swords of the state," Mr Al-Qarni said.

Asserting that Saudi Arabia was being targeted by Iran, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Muslim Brotherhood, Mr Al-Qarni's definition of the kingdom as a red line appeared to break with Sahwa and the Saudi past religious embrace of Islam's concept of the ummah, the global community of the faithful.

In the words of Saudi Arabia scholar Raihan Ismail, Mr Al-Qarni was rejecting the notion of the ummah because it "undermines the primacy of the nation-state."

In doing so, Mr Al-Qarni was attempting to provide religious cover for Prince Mohammed's apparent endorsement during a visit to Beijing earlier this year of China's

crackdown on Turkic Muslims and his apparent support for a US plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that is widely believed to favour Israel and deny Palestinian aspirations.

Anwar Gargash, the minister of state for foreign affairs of Saud Arabia's closest ally, the United Arab Emirates, hailed Mr Al-Qarni's apology as an important step "as we close the door to the stage of extremism and the employment of religion for political purposes." His comments put a finger on differences in the approaches towards Islam of Emirati crown prince Mohammed bin Zayed and his Saudi counterpart.

Viscerally opposed to political Islam, UAE Prince Mohamed rather than the Saudi crown prince has been the driver in support by the two Gulf states of anti-Islamist forces across the Middle East and North Africa.

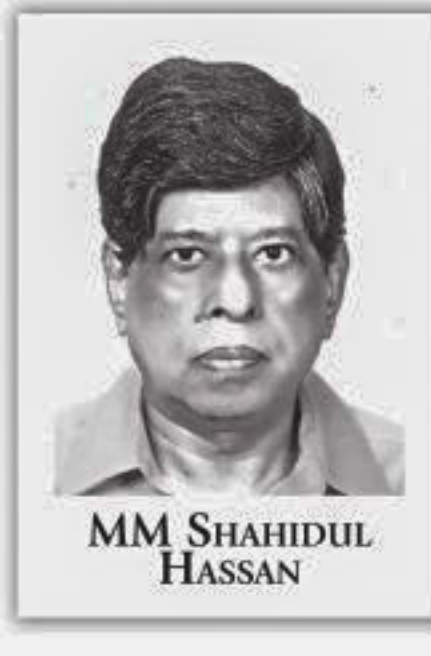
In fact, Prince Mohammed's notion of moderate Islam, although projected as a break with Saudi Arabia's past propagation of ultra-conservative strands of Islam that critics charged contributed to breeding grounds of violence, amounts to a form of conservative political Islam that is designed to bolster his autocratic regime rather than reform the faith.

Similarly, dissident Saudi scholar Madawi al-Rasheed asserted that the kingdom's decision to recently convene three Gulf, Arab and Islamic summits during Ramadan in the holy city of Mecca was "nothing but utter Islamism."

Ms Al-Rasheed argued that the summits exposed "the contradiction in the recent Saudi push to ban and criminalise Islamism. The three conferences are not being held to discuss theological matters, but to seek support for Saudi Arabia's king over serious, controversial and divisive political crises," she said.

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How universities can improve student satisfaction and quality of learning



MM SHAHIDUL HASSAN

SOCIETIES in both developed and developing countries are increasingly aware of the vital role that university graduates can play to advance their economies. Many examples can be cited where graduates helped to pull their countries out of recession (David Willetts 2017). One finding of a study on the economic growth in developed countries is that the returns on bachelor's degrees are much greater than that on level 10 and 12 qualifications. The challenge of a university, therefore, is to produce graduates with high-level skills and innovative quality. There are debates brewing on how to satisfy the students' needs, improve the quality of higher education and also to increase the satisfaction level of students at universities. Unfortunately, in this part of the world, particularly Bangladesh, teachers and universities pay little attention to student satisfaction and also to their academic progress. This needs to be changed.

Due to the massification of higher education with a greater range and variety of students, universities have to deal with complex levels of student expectations. They are facing great challenges in handling such variables which are many. First-year students, particularly those that come from the rural areas, usually face more difficulties in adjusting themselves to the university life and also to teaching. They encounter multiple processes and systems within the new environment that in many cases lead to anxiety and frustration. They feel a sense of disconnect and being unaccepted.

Universities, therefore, ought to pay greater attention to student satisfaction. Often dissatisfied students withdraw themselves during their first year at university.

From a financial perspective, it has been found that retaining students is more helpful than recruiting new ones. Dropouts also lose interest in pursuing higher studies. Retention of students, particularly new students, is an issue that needs to be addressed seriously by the universities. Orientation programmes can be the first chance to help new students get accustomed to the culture, expectations and resources of a university. Arranging social engagement activities at the orientation can create an opportunity for incoming students to interact with their peers and fellow students. Senior students can speak candidly about their first years at university. This is a great way for new students to get an idea of what to expect and what to aspire to. Also, registering for classes is always a great concern for the first-year students. Therefore, departments must give their students course schedules at the orientation. Departments also should give them an opportunity to meet with their academic advisers. Course instructors can tell their students about the teaching and assessment methods they will follow.

On the other hand, taking the time to explain how the process works at the university can also be extremely helpful. Giving new students access to a financial aid counsellor can be a big help since besides having the courses they want, students and their families are always anxious about the payment of tuition/other fees. Often, all they need during orientation is reassurance. They might not need all the answers right on the orientation day, but just being empathetic, listening, helping, and giving as much information as a university can will make



Universities in Bangladesh should take initiatives to revitalise their education system and adopt modern teaching and learning methods.

PHOTO: STAR

a lot of difference. Given the importance of orientation, universities can arrange the programmes in two consecutive days. The development of strong and personal connections with their university and its faculty members can definitely alleviate a lot of the issues facing the students.

Undoubtedly, strong connections and relationships have a positive impact on a student's dedication to studying and provide for a more enjoyable learning experience (Bowden, 2013). A sense of belonging is also a fundamental factor for retaining students beyond the first year of enrolment.

Recent researches show that the factors that cause dropout lie not only in students

and the situations they face in universities, but also in the very character of the educational settings. Universities abroad have overhauled their teaching, assessment and learning methods. On the contrary, little change has been done in these areas in Bangladeshi universities. Now, the time has come to rethink our education system and bring the necessary changes. The traditional education system adopted by universities doesn't provide students with necessary cognitive knowledge and skills and fulfil the performance expectations. On the other hand, the widely adopted system known as Outcome-Based Education (OBE) transforms education into personalised learning and

enables educational institutions to design instruction models tailored to learning preferences of the students. A good, high-quality education is to do with outcomes. A learning outcome refers to what a student can do as a result of a learning experience. It is a result of learning, which is a visible and observable demonstration of three main things—knowledge, combined with competence, combined with orientations. It is these three factors that determine the quality in higher education.

Some changes need to be undertaken in teaching. One of the best ways to improve the quality of teaching in a classroom is for the teacher to guide students to be active learners, rather than mere spectators. Active learning can best be described as a process through which students engage fully with the materials, participate in the class, and collaborate with each other as part of the learning process. Teachers should, therefore, look at ways to facilitate independent, critical, and creative thinking by using active learning techniques. These include student collaboration, asking students to analyse case studies, debates, and discussing new ideas both during lectures and in homework.

It is expected that universities in Bangladesh will take immediate initiatives to revitalise their education system and adopt modern teaching and learning methods. If necessary, they may engage foreign educationists who can help their teachers understand the internationally accepted education systems and how to successfully implement modern teaching and learning. Universities also need to pay attention to how they can support student success and spread the message that they value each student as an individual.

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QUOTABLE Quote

OPRAH WINFREY
(b. 1954)
American media executive, talk show host, television producer and philanthropist.

Do the one thing you think you cannot do. Fail at it. Try again. Do better the second time. The only people who never tumble are those who never mount the high wire. This is your moment. Own it.

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ACROSS

- 1 Spiced drink
- 5 Cowboy wear
- 10 Nametag word
- 12 Allowed
- 13 TV's DeGeneres
- 14 Contest setting
- 15 Sense of self
- 16 Batter's aid
- 18 Shucking spot
- 20 Put away
- 21 Some primates
- 23 Young fellow
- 24 Took the bus
- 26 Flock females
- 28 Chore
- 29 Paella base
- 31 Braying beast
- 32 Inferior
- 36 First lap leader
- 39 Bemoan

DOWN

- 1 Be a rooter
- 2 Hagar's wife
- 3 License
- 4 - de France
- 5 Large family
- 6 Take on
- 7 Artist's overlay
- 8 They're batted at parties
- 9 Was rude, in a way
- 11 In theory
- 17 Steamed state
- 19 Misbehaving
- 22 Battered down
- 24 1937 Nelson
- Eddy movie
- 25 Fit for censoring
- 27 Charlotte's creation
- 28 Joking
- 30 "Patience - virtue"
- 33 Utah city
- 34 Tax cheat's fear
- 35 Film holders
- 37 Ceases
- 38 Diner
- 42 Stop symbol

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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

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