

Opinion

Capitalism, not Islam, to blame for Saudi Arabia's Two-Tiered Citizenship System

By Michael Pecorara



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Imagine a society where wealthy Instagram influencers spend their winters snapping shots with backdrops of modern 21st century buildings and luxurious five-star hotels through lavish tourist visas. Imagine a society where you can become a citizen of a country that you have never even stepped foot in.

Now imagine the same society in which you struggle for decades to stay in a country on expensive employment visas. One where civil disobedience is squelched with the removal of citizenship rights and even death.

Perhaps you're thinking that such a society could only exist in a dystopian novel such as *The Hunger Games*. However, such a society is not so far-removed. The society that I was referring to exists in present-day Saudi Arabia.

In a society previously known for its strict adherence to Wahhabi Islamic principles, its holy sites, and its oil wealth, a virulent form of desert capitalism has appeared like an oasis incongruent with the context around it. To attract wealthy, white investors to the country, the Saudi government has created the Vision 2030 initiative, an initiative designed to move the Saudi economy beyond oil wealth primarily through foreign direct investment. The Vision 2030 initiative has essentially created a citizenship system based on wealth where the privileges one can enjoy from the Saudi government are directly predicated on wealth. For instance, according to Harvard Professor Rosie Bsheer, "the regime adopted new residency and naturalization programs, or golden visas, that targeted wealthy foreigners only...Being a particular kind of foreign economic agent (wealthy, and preferably white) was now an officially privileged category. This "premium

resident,” a noncitizen who may have never set foot inside the country, could now call Saudi Arabia home” (753). Evidently, the Saudi government is attempting to attract foreign investment through offering privileges to those in the investor class.

On the other hand, for those in Saudi Arabia who are not members of the investor class, these same rights are not extended. For the millions of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia primarily from South Asia, Bsheer writes, “They remained subject to the country’s volatile and increasingly expensive employment visas” (753). For those who engage in civil disobedience against the Saudi regime, Bsheer continues, “the regime punished those Saudi Arabians who remained outspoken with what some call civic, administrative, or legal death. It stripped over a dozen Saudi Arabians residing in the country (that I know of) of their citizenship rights” (751). Evidently, while citizenship rights, and the privileges that come along with it, are easier than ever to access for the business elite, rights for domestic laborers and activists are disappearing.

Before we are quick to judge the Saudi government’s case as highly unusual and extreme. Before we go around judging Islam and democracy as fundamentally incompatible as Samuel Huntington once did, it is important to recognize that capitalism, not Islam, has resulted in the same kind of two-tiered, wealth-based citizenship regime developing in Saudi Arabia. As proof, look no further than one of the most capitalistic nation in the world: the US. The US, like Saudi Arabia, heavily favors wealthier people as candidates for citizenship rights. As PBS reported, “The so-called “public charge” rule bars immigrants from coming to the U.S., claiming that if they are deemed to be unable to support themselves financially, they are at risk of needing federal safety net benefits—or becoming a “public charge” of the federal government” (Solman). Like Saudi Arabia, our immigration system also badly penalizes migrant workers. For instance, the Economic Policy Institute finds, “it benefits low-road employers who exploit the immigration status of unauthorized immigrants and authorized guestworkers through a legal framework that...leave migrant workers powerless to enforce their labor rights and hold employers accountable” (Costa).

It is important that before we view Saudi Arabia’s two-tiered citizenship regime as a product of an antidemocratic ideology, we instead look to our own country’s immigration problems and realize that a citizenship scheme based off of capitalism, not Islam, may be to blame. Perhaps a citizenship system that more closely adheres to Muslim values like compassion and empathy would be the antidote to both countries’ broken immigration systems.

SHOW CONVERSATION (2) 

The venue and medium for my creative project was an Op-Ed paper for the Wall Street Journal. I chose this venue because I firmly believe in the Op-Ed as a great tool that reporters and thinkers can use to flesh and tease out their viewpoints without rigid analytical scrutiny crushing great ideas before they can come to fruition. As Americans complain more and more about editorializing in their news sources, I take the antithetical view. I believe that it is the press's responsibility to speak truth to power and stand up to entrenched institutions, such as an immigration system based around wealth, and I believe that the Op-Ed really allows great thinkers to be able to do so, unequivocally. I chose the Wall Street Journal as the venue for my Op-Ed because the Wall Street Journal is largely economics-focused as is my Op-Ed, and also because the Wall Street Journal tends to heavily promote global, western-style capitalism without necessarily noting the disadvantages of adopting such a system on a global scale. I believe that my Op-Ed provides a nice balance to their usual content.

The audience reached through writing in the Wall Street Journal is also unique. Not only is the readership of the Wall Street Journal immense as it is one of the most widely read newspapers in America, but its readership base tends to be more conservative. The base tends to be the exact type of people who would read about Saudi Arabia's two-tiered citizenship program and attribute it to a democracy problem exacerbated by Islam. By writing this Op-Ed, I hoped that it would be viewed by such people and persuade them into changing their mind by drawing parallels between Saudi Arabia and the US's immigration system. The echo chamber that exists in the current news landscape only entrenches people in their pre-existing viewpoints; my goal was to challenge, not reaffirm pre-existing viewpoints of readers. Also, many readers of the Wall Street Journal are of the same type of investor-class that the Saudi government is courting. Hopefully by exposing the oppressive citizenship scheme for what it is, I will be able to put pressure on investors to avoid investing in Saudi Arabia until reforms are made. Hopefully, this would then put pressure on the government to make reforms.

This Op-Ed is a natural extension of the point I highlighted in Part A about the duality between the way Saudi Arabia treats its citizens vs the way it treats wealthy, foreign investors. I use the information I learned in the Bsheer article and in the class as a whole to craft an argument relating Saudi Arabia's immigration system to the US's, all the while using the information from class to form a persuasive, cogent argument in my Op-Ed exposing the system's injustices. It is important to speak truth to power and to advance the needle on human rights using reliable facts and sources which, I believe, I have done.

Works Cited

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