

The adoption of communication strategies to comply contemporary definition of nationalism via employment policy in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Since 2001, nationalism in Saudi Arabia has been defined as an adoption of citizen participation as a means of transferring citizen loyalty from the religious establishment to the government under pressure from the US following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Communication strategies have been adopted to encourage Saudi citizens to participate and discuss their interests, and to inculcate nationalism and loyalty to the Saudi government. In 2011 after the Arab Spring (a revolution across Arabic countries), the Ministry of Labour in Saudi Arabia introduced a policy called Nitaqat, whereby private sector corporations were compelled to employ Saudi citizens over foreigners. In meeting national employment needs, Nitaqat operates with the official aim of acting in the best interests of Saudi citizens and, in turn, strengthening nationalism among Saudi people. Focusing on the introduction and implementation phases of the Nitaqat policy, this paper aims to examine the extent to which the Ministry of Labour has adopted communication strategies to meet ordinary Saudi citizens' needs through the obtainment of employee rights. This paper uses in-depth interviews with elite members of the Ministry of Labour, as well as employers and ordinary Saudis, to fulfil the objectives of the study. The findings indicate that communication strategies utilised before the introduction of Nitaqat operate in an exclusive way. However, after the launch of Nitaqat – and considering the vocal dissatisfaction surrounding this policy – the Ministry of Labour established a new department to engage citizens in revising Nitaqat to meet their needs.

Introduction

In 1932, the Saudi Arabia nation-state defined Saudi nationalism as loyalty to the religious establishment (Alrebh 2011; Al-Rasheed 2011; Lacey 2010; Thompson 2014). In 2001, however, the Saudi government adopted citizen participation as a means of transferring citizen loyalty from the religious establishment to the government (Wurm 2008; Thompson 2014). This occurred under pressure from the US following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. It also instituted the Centre for National Dialogue to encourage Saudi citizens' participation in discussing their interests, and to inculcate nationalism and loyalty to the Saudi government. While the adoption of citizen participation by the Saudi government was to meet Saudi citizens' needs, this was not the outcome, and unemployment remained high among Saudi citizens.

In 2011, after the Arab Spring revolutions, nationalism was redefined by meeting Saudi citizens' rights via citizen participation. By the end of 2011, the Nitaqat policy had been introduced to address citizen needs in regards to employment. Nitaqat forces private sector organisations to employ Saudis and to transfer employment from foreign workers to Saudi citizens. Under this policy, private sector organisations are subject to privileges or penalties depending on the percentage of Saudis they employ. However, both the

owners of private sector companies and Saudi citizen employees have complained about Nitaqat during its implementation.

Contrasting voices have also been heard in media reports within Saudi Arabia. Some private sector employees have said that their jobs are poorly paid and that many Saudis find themselves overqualified (Okaz 2012). Around 30 percent of Saudi enterprises were forced to close down during 2012, the first year of Nitaqat, as a result of pressures the policy placed on companies who were forced to employ foreigners, and the subsequent lack of desire among employers to hire Saudi citizens (Saudi Gazette 2012). It has been said that that the Nitaqat policy does not serve small businesses but rather hurts many of them and forces them to exit the market (Saudi Gazette 2012).

Thus, communication is crucial in order to meet the needs of Saudi citizens and to solve the unemployment problem that young Saudis now face. This paper examines the extent to which Saudi citizens were engaged via communication strategies intended to meet their needs and serve their interests within the Nitaqat policy.

Unemployment and the need for communication strategies

Since 2001, the Saudi government has sought to obtain the loyalty of its citizens by introducing new strategies that serve the interests of the public in different aspects of social rights, including employment. However, in September 2002, the Saudi Central Department of Statistics released a report on unemployment in Saudi Arabia that showed a total unemployment rate at the end of 1999 of 8.1 percent overall (6.8 percent among male nationals and 15.8 percent among female nationals) (Ministry of Labour, 2013). While these figures should be approached with caution because it can be assumed that only 19 percent of the population, or 35.3 percent of the population at working age, were participants in the workforce (Cordesman, 2002), unemployment still remained a problem. By 2011, the unemployment rate among Saudis was 11 percent overall, and as much as 33 percent among Saudi females (Ministry of Labour, 2013). Based on these statistics, unemployment actually increased between 1999 and 2011.

In 2011, the Arab Spring revolution occurred. Discontent was growing among Saudi citizens who were experiencing not only unemployment, but considerable disempowerment in regards to the Ministry of Labour's decision-making processes around unemployment strategies. Many Saudis had no feasible options available to escape their oppressive social circumstances (Lacroix, 2011). By the end of 2011, the Nitaqat policy launched, and was said to be in the best interests of Saudi citizens.

Communication and citizen participation in the design of Nitaqat was considered optimal in producing outcomes that best reflect the desires and needs of Saudi citizens (Lenihan 2002; Parvez 2003; King & Stivers 1998). This paper examines the extent to which communication approaches that intended to serve the interests of Saudi nationals were adopted by the Ministry of Labour before and after the launch of Nitaqat.

Communication is important in the relationship between the government and its people, and is even more important in the introduction of new policies. If citizens do not understand government policies, the policies will not meet their needs or permit them to obtain and exercise their rights. Thus, the argument in support of participatory approach of development communication is still persuasive. Cornish and Dunn (2009) noted that despite development stemming from different principles, it still has an influence on participatory communication.

The first academic to create a model of citizen participation was Shelley Arnstein (1969). She created a ladder of participation, using the rungs of the ladder to indicate the degree of citizen participation. Arnstein (1969) argued that citizen participation is based on the redistribution of power that enables citizens presently excluded from the political and economic processes to be deliberately included in these processes in the future.

To fulfill the objective of this paper, a total of 45 participants took part in in-depth interviews: 25 local Saudis (both employees and jobseekers); 12 employers; and eight elite Saudis from the Ministry of Labour. The following sections of this paper present the results of the data collection and analysis.

Participation of Saudi Citizens before the creation of Nitaqat

The findings indicated that during the introduction of the Nitaqat policy, the Ministry of Labour was aware of the need for citizen involvement. The Ministry of Labour communicated with and invited participation from wealthy and powerful businessmen, professionals, academics and other elites from within the Ministry. The Ministry conducted 40 exclusive workshops, carefully choosing the groups and individuals they wanted to consult. Some participants commented on the workshops, as illustrated below:

"We conducted 40 workshops and consulted businessmen and employers in the private sector, including many Saudi experts and an economist (Elite in Ministry of Labour 1). We invited citizens by sending faxes to their companies, asking them to attend these workshops. We engaged very wealthy powerful businessmen, professionals, academics, and elites in the Ministry of Labour and ordinary Saudis as well" (Elite in Ministry of Labour 3).

Many scholars, such as Moemeka (1994), Cohen (2011), and Charalabidis and Koussouris (2012) have argued that communication and citizen participation should take an inclusive approach. The Ministry of Labour did not consult or give all Saudi citizens the opportunity to express their views about Nitaqat. What has instead occurred in contemporary Saudi Ministry of Labour is reflective of the views of Arnstein (1969), who argues that the aim of engagement is to have the power to finalise decisions; the ability to seize control of decision making is what constitutes true citizen engagement. Unprecedented government–citizen communication, and the participation of powerful businessmen, professionals, academics and elites, has empowered these groups of people to occupy the middle level of Arnstein's ladder (1969), which encompasses information, consultation and placation. As a result, only these groups of citizens were given the right to hear, to have a voice, and to be. Thus, before the Nitaqat policy was even introduced, communication was not sufficient enough to meet the needs of ordinary Saudis.

Three months before the launch of the Nitaqat policy, the Ministry of Labour implemented a number of publicity campaigns across different types of media, namely television, newspapers, social media and the Ministry of Labour website. They also conducted workshops in different parts of Saudi Arabia to inform citizens that the policy was being introduced specifically to meet their needs. Employers who were interviewed confirmed what had been revealed by ordinary Saudi respondents:

"The Ministry of Labour ran huge campaigns to inform and educate the people about this policy. I really knew about it from the newspapers and the advertisements on the television" (Ordinary Saudi 3).

"I attended one of the education workshops because the company received an invitation and I was assigned to attend it. It was useful; they provided us with lots of information. There are also lots of videos on YouTube showing the Minister of Labour talking about this policy. I have kept watching them until now to get information about this policy and when I have an inquiry with regard to Nitaqat" (Employer 1).

Consequently, with the exclusive strategies adopted to engage Saudi citizens, a large number of disagreements and concerns surrounding Nitaqat became apparent. Ordinary Saudis (employers and employees alike) were dissatisfied with many aspects of the policy, as evidenced in the following comments:

"I ended up closing my restaurant and now I'm unemployed, and I should ask the Ministry of Labour to employ me. I'm losing my right to live well and have money in this nation, just because of Nitaqat" (Employer 10).

"I started my business two years ago; it was a restaurant that cooked African food, and it was so successful. But when Nitaqat was launched and it asked me to employ three Saudis and I did many times but they resigned before the end of three months. Then I was subjected to penalties and I could not renew the visas for the contractual workers and I ended up closing the restaurant" (Ordinary Saudi 13).

"I have seven three stars hotels in the Holy city Makkah. I was working very well before Nitaqat. Now after this policy, I cannot work properly, I'm always subjected to the penalties because the low number of Saudis working in the hotels. So I could not renew the visas for contractual foreigners and now I don't have enough workers, so the level of the service collapsed. Then I decided to shut down two of these hotels and moved the workers to the remaining hotels to boost the level of the service again with the minimum number of workers just because of Nitaqat. I live in a rich country but I cannot run my own business to live well and obtain the welfare in Saudi Arabia" (Employer 4).

After the disagreements surrounding Nitaqat were voiced, seven elites from the Ministry of Labour said they valued the citizen participation approach to improving the policy.

"Considering citizen participation is our trajectory for improving Nitaqat and enhancing nationalism among Saudis by letting them enjoy employment and the wealth of this country" (Elite in Ministry of Labour 5).

"If the government recorded the views expressed in reaction to the policy, they would discover that, if only the citizens were always aware and involved, then there would be a dramatic difference" (Elite in Ministry of Labour 7).

"We are not perfect, but we open our hands to citizens. We ask them to talk. By approaching social dialogues and ensuring transparency, we will show our faults to the public and ask them to assist us" (Elite in Ministry of Labour 8).

This is consistent with Lacroix's claim (2011) that prior to the revolutions, the Saudi government selectively chose to ignore the people's growing discontent with the policy but that after the Arab Spring, they began to respond to the needs of the Saudi people.

Citizen participation after the implementation of Nitaqat

After Nitaqat was implemented, the Ministry of Labour started to attribute greater value to inclusive citizen participation. Moreover, this study found that the Ministry of Labour permitted Saudis to participate by translating their demands into tangible policy outputs, a finding supported by Milakovich (2012) and Reddick (2011). Participatory communication approaches adopted after the implementation of Nitaqat, which although late in the process, still allowed for citizen participation to contribute to the enhancement of Nitaqat. The dual participatory communication approaches used were social dialogue and digital media.

Social dialogue

Interviews with elite members of the Ministry of Labour revealed that the Ministry of Labour conducted multiple social dialogues and invited Saudi citizens to attend them.

"Social dialogue is beneficial from different aspects, in order to speed up the process of coming out with the right decisions and to indicate that the Ministry of Labour consults ordinary Saudis and So we stop being opinionated in the decisions we make" (Elite in Ministry of Labour 1).

"We keep each party and side separate, to ultimately resolve disagreements. Any general consensus or contention is forwarded to Dr Fakhri, the King and the Shura Committee for finalization" (Elite in Ministry of Labour 2).

The elite members of the Ministry of Labour viewed social dialogue as a way to speed up the process of decision-making and to resolve disagreements in a transparent manner. They said that citizen participation is a good sign, because it indicates that the government and the Ministry of Labour are not fixed in their decisions. It also shows that decisions are not simply an outcome of the government's perceptions, but are shaped by collaborative agreement. The finding is supported by Cohen (2011), Gaventa (2004) and Thompson (2014), who have all demonstrated that citizen participation can lead to favourable outcomes, including improved policies, and decisions that truly reflect citizens' needs. The findings also showed that a participatory approach discourages passivity and promotes active participation in political processes.

However, the findings from employers and ordinary Saudis who participated in this study contradict the views of Cohen (2011), Gaventa (2004) and Thompson (2014) but support those of Yamani and the Royal Institute of International Affairs (2000), who claim that citizen participation often falls short of achieving the ideal goal of true participation, particularly in the public sector. The employers and ordinary Saudis interviewed noted that no significant changes have been made based on their participation in these dialogues, which has led many employers and ordinary Saudis to believe that these social dialogues are

superficial and do not lead to change. While Saudi citizens were initially enthusiastic about attending social dialogues, when no recognisable changes occurred in the Nitaqat policy as result of their input, they became less motivated to participate.

"I attended three social dialogues and I talked to the Minister of Labour and his consultants to change lots of decisions in relation to Nitaqat, for example, revising the required percentages of Saudi employment in each category of private sector organisations and looking after women when they employed them, but nothing changed or improved. Now, the employer is the victim. He is subject to penalties and he will lose his business" (Employer 4).

In regard to employers and ordinary Saudis, Yamani and the Royal Institute of International Affairs (2000) were not in support of social dialogue within Saudi Arabia, stating that national dialogue in the country is often considered a formality of sponsored public relations, with the main goal being to ameliorate societal frustrations.

Digital media

In terms of digital media, the findings of this study addressed the two main sources of evidence of citizen participation: the Ministry of Labour's official website; and social media via the Ministry of Labour's Facebook and Twitter accounts. The Ministry of Labour website, called 'Together' (<http://www.ma3an.gov.sa>), aims to expedite and increase participation of citizens in decision making. Ordinary Saudis can visit the website at any time to vote on drafts, decisions or innovative ideas uploaded by other citizens. The website encompasses citizens' perceptions and opinions, provides government information, and encourages citizens to express their views via opinion polls.

This is achieved using three methods. The first, called 'Utilising Polls', involves the Minister of Labour running a poll to obtain the opinions of the public on general ideas around future policy improvement. The second method, 'Improving Together', is where citizens can vote on drafts of decisions, formulate final decisions, or revise other decisions before they are presented again to the public for voting. In 2014, the Ministry of Labour used the 'Improving Together' in Together website to present 29 decisions that had to be reached. The third method is called 'Developing Together', and is a process whereby ideas taken directly from citizens are developed. The public then vote on these ideas, with the winning idea put into action.

The second source of evidence of citizen engagement is social media. The Ministry of Labour has an official Facebook page and a Twitter account. These are used for many purposes, depending on users' needs. The Ministry of Labour uses social media accounts to publish new policies, distribute information about achievements of the Ministry of Labour, and provide a channel for asking citizens to visit the website to vote on drafts. While citizens all use the social media accounts in different ways, many visit the Ministry of Labour Facebook page and Twitter account to voice their anger on policies or to find answers to their questions.

Employers and employees participants stated that the citizen participation approach that uses digital and social media unifies the visions and objectives of the Ministry of Labour and Saudi citizens. It provides a valuable means for ordinary Saudis, whose voices and opinions are otherwise not reachable by or

accessible to elite policy makers in the Ministry of Labour, to express their visions and objectives. Citizens' visions and views are made accessible to the Ministry of Labour, just as the objectives and policies of the Ministry of Labour are made accessible to ordinary Saudis.

"I visited the 'Together' website to vote on the draft of working hours. I'm really in love with this approach, because it's time to make every Saudi citizen's opinion and view accessible to the policy-makers and people in authority" (Ordinary Saudi 15).

Conclusion

To conclude, before the Nitaqat policy was introduced, communication between the government and the citizens of Saudi Arabia was not sufficient enough to meet the needs of ordinary citizens. Instead, communication with Saudi citizens ran in an exclusive way. After the implementation of Nitaqat, the Ministry of Labour adopted two new communication approaches: social dialogue and digital media. Many Saudi citizens felt that these social dialogues were superficial and do not lead to change. While Saudi citizens were enthusiastic in attending the social dialogues, when no recognisable changes occurred in Nitaqat, they became less motivated because they lost hope that their views will be considered. In regards to digital media, the visions and objectives of Saudi citizens are made accessible to the Ministry of Labour.

This study has a limitation in regards to the study of communication approaches applied before the introduction of Nitaqat. The study was conducted three years after the implementation of Nitaqat. Thus, it could not capture the actual communication strategies adopted during the introduction of Nitaqat in real time. The data collected relies mostly on the narratives and experiences provided by the elite in the Ministry of Labour and Saudi citizens, as shown in the in-depth interviews. This study would nonetheless be more holistic if the researcher had captured the communication strategies employed during the introduction of Nitaqat.

The findings of this study have an important practical implication. The results presented here are of value to the Saudi Ministry of Labour, as it will help the Ministry to better understand how Saudi citizens experienced communication and citizen participation under Nitaqat. This knowledge will assist the Ministry to make informed decisions regarding the enhancement of communication strategies to meet Saudi citizens' needs in the future.

It is recommended that future research that addresses the communication strategies adopted by the Ministry of Labour should be examined to investigate the sustainability of citizen participation and whether it has improved nationalism in the long term.

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