

SAUDI ARABIA: Despite “reforms”, Riyadh grants new powers to the religious police

The authorities have approved a rule on “public decency” that targets “indecorous” clothing and graffiti. Uncertainty about entry into force. According to critics, it lends itself to arbitrary interpretations and applications that favor repression. Controversy and protests on social media.

AsiaNews.it (19.06.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2WTrcBV> – A bill being approved in Saudi Arabia, centered on decorum in public places, has already raised fierce controversy over its repressive content. According to the critics, in fact, it would mean giving new repressive powers to the religious police which, in the last period, had seen their authority curtailed following a timid reform program.

Originally, the law on “public decency” – approved by the government in April – was to come into force on 25 May last; however, to date there is no definite information on its application. With the aim of safeguarding the “values and principles” of Saudi Arabia, the cradle of Islam, it targets clothing that “offend decorum”, including shorts for men, and “graffiti” or other forms of pictorial “street” art.

Offenders risk fines ranging up to 5,000 riyals, just over 1300 dollars.

Critics say that the law, as it is formulated, is too vague and lends itself to individual interpretation; this means that, in the application phase, it could lead to arbitrary and disproportionate punishments. Hence the reaction on social networks and on the web, against the “return” of the religious police (haia) “without a beard” as the scholar Sultan al-Amer wrote on twitter.

In the past it was not difficult to meet bearded guards of the religious police intent on patrolling roads and shopping centers in the main cities of the country; among their duties was to chastise women who wore bright nail varnish or caught while driving, when it was still forbidden. They were in charge of rigidly enforcing gender segregation. However, in recent years, following the reform program wished by the crown prince Mohammed bin Salman (Mbs), their power has been reduced – and greatly.

Social median in the Arab world messages with the hashtag “the shorts do not offend public morals” are multiplying along with memes of sweating men running on treadmills in loose traditional clothes. For many analysts and experts this confusion is the result of “the meeting between Saudi Arabia and Singapore”. “The Saudi leadership – says Kristin Diwan, of the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington – wants to undermine the Islamic base of social power, while maintaining absolute political control and public order”.

“This [law] is an effort – observes Ali Shihabi, founder of the Saudi think-tank Arabia Foundation – to balance the pressure of conservative elements of society, which accuse [the government] of letting things get out of control”. Moreover, social transformations are viewed with “resentment”

in conservative and radical neighborhoods, which call for greater state control in public life (of men and women).

Saudi Arabia is governed by an absolute Sunni monarchy, based on a Wahhabi fundamentalist view of Islam.

Over the past two years, the Crown Prince's social reforms included granting women the right to drive cars and to attend sporting events in designated areas of stadiums.

However, the authorities have also cracked down on senior officials, business people, activists and critical voices, most notably in the Jamal Khashoggi affair, raising questions about the real extent of change.