

Saudi National Dialogue chief says no boundaries in forums

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King Abdul Aziz Center for National Dialogue Secretary-General Faisal Bin Muammar said there are “no boundaries” in the discussions raised in the national forums, adding the amount of freedom granted to participants who represent different sectors and social segments of the Saudi community has been “unprecedented”.

Over the past several years, hundreds of Saudi men and women have engaged in six National Dialogue forums, giving their points of views on extremism and moderation, national unity, women’s rights, issues affecting youths, the relationship with non-Saudis and non-Muslims, and the education system in the Kingdom. Recommendations of each forum have been presented to Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah. The next forum is scheduled for December and will address labor issues.

In an interview with Arab News, Muammar said that in addition to the unlimited amount of freedom in discussions, for the past several years discussions have been aired live on Saudi Arabian Television for viewers in the nation to watch.

“Everyone gives credit to the King Abdul Aziz Center for National Dialogue for its contribution in raising the amount of freedom of speech to a level that has never been seen here before,” he said.

Realizing the importance of national dialogue and the challenges to harm national unity and prosperity on both the domestic and international level, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah — when he was crown prince — announced the establishment of the King Abdul Aziz Center for National Dialogue on a live televised speech on Aug. 3, 2003.

“I have no doubt the center and the continuation of dialogue under its auspices are a historic achievement that will secure a channel for the responsible expression of opinion. This, in turn, will have an impact on the fight against extremism and provide an atmosphere where considered views and new ideas that reject terrorism and extremist thought can emerge,” Abdullah said during the announcement.

On June 2003, the King Abdul Aziz Library witnessed the convening of the first national dialogue meeting, the National Forum for Dialogue. A year later, the center’s main headquarters was built in the capital.

Despite the fact that the first and second national forums were closed to the media, organizers later gave in to public pressure and allowed the Saudi press to attend preparatory sessions and the main forum talks starting from the third forum for national dialogue held in Madinah on June 12, 2004.

Muammar said that for any national dialogue to be constructive it was necessary that all civic institutions be represented in the forum to give their point of view.

Regarding the participation of nationals who follow different Islamic schools of thought the official said that national unity could play a bonding role among people of different madahib.

“They realize that division in its various forms destroys the unity and conciliations that build brotherhood under the umbrella of one nation,” said Muammar.

The secretary-general said the forums have succeeded in establishing a common ground for healthy dialogue between different segments of the Saudi community.

“The result is that these forums have reflected in a positive way on the cultural and social reality in Saudi Arabia,” he said.

Asked about the mechanisms in which people are chosen to participate in national forums, Muammar said that the presidential committee, the general secretariat of the center and the preparatory committees consult experts and to choose the cream of society to participate in national forums.

Participants vary according to their background and education. They include religious scholars, scientists, thinkers and academics.

“These meetings have proved that no matter how extreme a thought may be it can be dealt with through meaningful dialogue in the context of national unity, which is the basis for the nation,” he said.

“National unity is the lifeguard for the nation when ideologies and people’s interest are mixed.”

He said that King Abdullah had warned of sectarianism, tribal differences and favoring one segment of society against the other as elements that threatened the unity of the country in his annual speech in the Shoura Council this week.

“The king has always urged that national unity should come first,” he said.

“Another important matter National Dialogue forums have stressed is that the Saudi society consists of a variation of cultural and religious elements,” he added. “This is a reality we see in our lives.”

Asked how the forums have helped in renewing religious speech in Saudi Arabia, Muammar said that among the recommendations reached at the second national forum for dialogue held in Makkah was “stressing the objection to individual fatwas (religious edicts), and in general issues that concern the nation’s interests”.

He also mentioned that the participants had called for “reinforcing the culture of dialogue in Saudi society and educating generations in schools and universities on its importance while opening the doors of constructive speech.”

Participants have also asked for the development of curriculums to guarantee the spirit of harmony and moderation, he said.

He said that the forum had also asked that “a nationwide strategy be drafted to help contain youth and keep them away from extremism” by providing a common ground where moderation and harmony would flourish.

“The National Dialogue has a vision regarding renewing religious speech to be in line with modern times, without changing the basics,” he said. “It is essential that the religious speech be renewed according to changing times and changes from one generation to another.”

“In the past, the religious speech had its own style. And in our current age it needs another style which comes in line with development and people’s needs that suit their culture, understandings, and social and psychological status while maintaining the basics of Shariah law.”

Saudi women have played a major role in the success of the past six national forums, he said. “The Saudi woman has proved her excellence in the participation of national forums, since it started. She is the member in the organizing committee, the journalist and the speaker,” he said.

However, Muammar did not indicate that future forums would allow adult men and women to be together in one auditorium. (It is common at events for women to be placed in a separate hall with closed-circuit television.)

“The religious and cultural ethics of the Saudi society are respected by the organizers of the National Dialogue,” he said. “The segregation has never been a hindrance for women to contribute and voice their comments.”

Even though recommendations reached at the end of each forum are only advisory and not legislative, there have been ideas that are currently under study to take into more serious and actionable consideration.

“Everyone is calling for the implementation of these recommendations according to a studied timeframe,” he said.

The upcoming forum will address labor issues and will have participation by representatives of the public and private sectors.

He said the forum would provide “an environment for open and constructive discussion” on one of the major issues facing the young generation of Saudis today.

“The participation of labor officials will enable men and women participants to discuss with concerned authorities the problems in the labor sector to reach potential goals,” he said.