

Comparative Discussions on Political Modernization in Saudi Arabia Conference Report



*July 11 – 13, 2005
Madrid, Spain*



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Modernization in Saudi Arabia*
Conference Report

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past two years, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) has sought to provide reform-minded Saudi Arabians and international political practitioners with opportunities to share and discuss their respective political experiences. The Institute's efforts recently culminated in a seminar, organized jointly with the Club of Madrid (CoM), entitled *Political Systems and Local Governance*. The goal of the seminar was to begin developing a long-term strategy for assisting Saudis in their efforts towards political modernization in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).



The seminar focused on engaging reform-minded governmental and non-governmental individuals from Saudi Arabia in comparative discussions of political systems, electoral processes and mechanisms of local governance in the Gulf region and beyond. The seminar took place July 11-13, in Madrid, Spain and included eight participants from Saudi Arabia; Club of Madrid members Sadiq Al-Mahdi, former Prime Minister of Sudan, Rexhep

Meidani, former President of Albania, and Felipe González, former President of the Government of Spain; as well as other political leaders and expert analysts from Spain, South America and the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region; a full agenda of the seminar can be found in Appendix I. The seminar was chaired by President of NDI Kenneth Wollack and the Secretary General of the CoM and former Prime Minister of Canada the Right Honorable Kim Campbell.

The presence of high-level, experienced political leaders allowed for comparative discussions of the transitional experiences of Albania, Bahrain, Chile, Lebanon, Morocco, Spain and Sudan; the mix of experiences from democracies and non-democracies helped to keep the discussion focused on realistic benchmarks for Saudi Arabia. Specific discussions focused on democratic developments and obstacles to local governance, elections, media, civil society and women's political participation. Key challenges to reform in the Kingdom were identified, including power sharing by the ruling family, other governmental officials and Saudi citizens, as well as the relationship between politics and religion in an eventually democratic Saudi Arabia. Strategies for continuing the reform process from within Saudi Arabia were explored, as were strategies for promoting links with and support from the international community, including both governments and non-governmental entities.

While participants agreed there is no linear model of transition and the experiences presented were not a perfect fit for the context of Saudi Arabia, they were able to share experiences and identify strategies that may be applicable or adapted to meet the needs of reform-minded elements of Saudi society. All of the presentations provided Saudi participants with an increased understanding of how political and civil society transformations move forward as parallel processes.

The Spanish transition provided a good example of positive nation building and reconciliation among different facets in society, while the Chilean transition offered insight into the role of religious institutions and popular economic movements during times of transition. The ongoing experiences of Sudan and other MENA countries demonstrated how lengthy and complex the transition period can be. Each presenter stressed that enduring reform processes must respond to domestic factors such as social values, cultural traditions, religion and economic structures in order for external factors

such as international pressure, incentives, partnerships and global markets to be most effective. Of particular interest to Saudi participants were the roles played by the respective monarchies during times of transition.

Recommendations resulting from the discussions include:

- Identifying pockets of opportunity that exist in Saudi Arabia now;
- Engaging government officials through local government and political connections;
- Developing partnerships with journalists and media outlets in Saudi Arabia to educate, change attitudes, bring out new ideas and spark initiatives;
- Reaching out to diverse segments of Saudi society in order to build common ground and identify a vision of reform, facilitated by discussions on topics such as:
 - (1) surmounting the challenges of reform;
 - (2) strategies for power sharing; and
- Utilizing opportunities for increased international involvement to mobilize popular support for change, including organizations such as NDI and the CoM working with reform-minded Saudis in Saudi Arabia to establish constructive lines of communication with Saudi officials.

Much of this report is compiled directly from the words, thoughts, frustrations and ideas expressed by participants during the seminar. Saudi participants expressed their interest in starting a process of modernization and are seeking opportunities to learn about the experiences of others. While this seminar provided such an opportunity and enabled participants to identify new strategies for promoting reform, there is an understanding that genuine change will take time and require a governmental and societal commitment that does not yet exist. The newly established municipal councils offer an avenue for increased participation and cooperation between Saudis and the international community. NDI and the Club of Madrid are committed to continuing to seek opportunities for including Saudis in programs throughout the Middle East and working within Saudi Arabia with those engaged in political development.

II. BACKGROUND

Restrictions on expression, access to information, the right to assembly and women's rights characterize the social and political landscape in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Unemployment estimates that top 15 percent and a rapidly growing population add to the challenges facing the Kingdom. Since September 11, however, the Saudi royal family has been challenged by many who claim it is complicit in allowing the fermentation of extremist elements within the country's educational and religious institutions. President Bush's repeated calls for democratic reform in the Arab world and greater respect for human rights, particularly in the Gulf region, have also increased pressure on the royal family to move forward with political reforms.

This scenario has led many members of the royal family, including King Abdullah, to recognize the necessity of expanding political space to diffuse the power of extremists and maintain the legitimacy of the current ruling order. The royal pardon of three academics convicted on charges of calling for a constitutional monarchy and the King's willingness to meet with signatories of a "Strategic Vision" manifesto, outlining increased political and social freedoms, coupled with demonstrations in the streets of Riyadh and the holding of limited local elections, indicate a possible trend toward political reform over the next several years.

In February of this year, Saudi Arabia held its first Local Municipal Council elections in Riyadh, followed by a second phase of elections on March 3, for the seats representing the southern and eastern regions and a final poll on April 21 for the northern and western regions to determine the last of the elected seats. The remaining seats will be appointed by the government. The election was marked by a vibrant campaign period. Candidates erected huge tents on empty plots where the public and the press asked about their platforms. Political reform, corruption, unemployment, environmental protection and better public services were the main issues candidates addressed. While the law forbade candidates from using television, they used web pages, employed public relations companies and placed ads in newspapers. NDI provided candidate training manuals and materials to Saudi candidates through its Bahrain office.

Early figures stated that only 25 percent of the eligible population registered to vote; polling revealed varied reasons for not registering, from lack of information to general apathy. Women were barred from the polls despite Saudi law stating that citizens over 21 years of age, except military personnel, who have lived in a constituency for one year before polling day, are eligible to vote. Saudi officials claimed it was not administratively possible to allow women to register or vote, citing the low number of women who hold national identification (ID) cards. Recently, women were allowed to apply for ID cards without the permission of a male relative, but only 6% of Saudi women requested them. Without ID cards, voters cannot register and officials say it was not possible to issue ID cards for all women before the vote.

Women's rights activists in Saudi Arabia have written to the chairman of the General Committee for the Elections demanding representation through government appointment. According to *Arab News*, the chairman has said that women would be allowed to vote in 2009. He also stated that women were barred from the polls during this election because it was a 'new experience' and the short time allotted made it unfeasible for women to participate. Despite women not being able to participate, Saudis have generally spoken of the municipal elections as an important step in the democratic reform of the Kingdom; however, it remains unclear who will be appointed

to the remaining council seats and with what degree of authority the councils will operate.

“Saudi Arabia requires a lot of hard work which should help us to realize that we must start from the bottom to the top until we arrive at a point where society recognizes it deserves democracy.”

-Saudi participant

In 2003, NDI initiated a program to support activists in the Saudi reform movement. Through the Institute’s regional field offices, contacts within the Kingdom and in Washington, NDI has provided information, networking resources and ideas generated from international experts to Saudi individuals interested in advancing meaningful political reforms. Despite setbacks to the reform movement and the ongoing challenges of working in Saudi Arabia, NDI remains committed to supporting reform-minded individuals striving to begin a process towards a more democratic and inclusive Saudi society. When appropriate, NDI includes Saudi participants in program activities in the Gulf and across the MENA region.

In planning for the *Political Systems and Local Governance* seminar, NDI worked collaboratively with the Club of Madrid (www.cludmadrid.org). NDI’s relationships with leaders across the MENA region and the Club of Madrid’s membership of former heads of state and government from Europe, Asia, North and South America, ensured a broad range of attendees at the gathering that was significant to the discussion of comparative experiences. Saudi participants also represented a range of Saudi society. Five of the eight Saudi Arabian participants were professional women who either attempted to stand as candidates during the recent municipal elections or have been outspoken on reform issues; the three men included two recently elected municipal councillors and a petition signer.

The agenda of the seminar emphasized the experiences of countries such as Albania, Bahrain, Chile, Jordan, Morocco, Spain and Sudan, while the focus of discussions was to understand what motivated, and continues to motivate, the efforts of reformers and municipal councillors. Participants from Saudi Arabia were encouraged to draw parallels and distinctions that could be relevant to their own efforts, with particular regard to how the newly elected municipal councils may be an effective tool for implementing reform and bridging the gap between the government and reform-minded citizens.

III. REFORM IN SAUDI ARABIA

Participants from Saudi Arabia were asked to share their viewpoints and understanding of reforms being undertaken within the Kingdom. Each participant made a presentation on an area in which reform efforts were being made or discussed by the government and within Saudi society, including local governance, elections and women’s participation, the role of media and civil society. In their presentations, each speaker identified areas for continued reform and improvement, but also noted the successes being achieved under current efforts; each encouraged a continued pace of improvement.

During the open discussion, Saudi participants expressed a general feeling that the Kingdom is on an unstoppable path to change and that Saudis, both citizens and government officials, must take advantage of opportunities to facilitate the process. They indicated that reform within the Kingdom is driven by activists within society, with pragmatic steps taken by the royal family in response to both internal and external pressures. The reform movement crosses segments of society and groups within Islam,

all of whom have been subjected to intermittent arrests and interrogation by the government for their activities. The arrests of twelve reform-minded individuals in March 2004 stalled calls for reform and delayed the pace of the reform process. Prior to these arrests, activists spoke the loudest and were considered to be the “face of reform”; since the arrests, activists have not been able to put forth an alternative plan or vision for continued pressure.

In the meantime, the royal family and government officials have begun to speak more publicly and take action to illustrate their embrace of a process of reform. Some members of the royal family and government are actually beginning to use the word “reform” in speeches, while others prefer to use the term development, feeling that the word “reform” indicates mistakes made that need to be corrected. King Abdullah, Prince Talal, Prince Faisal and other members of the royal family have agreed with proposed reform measures, leading to an optimistic atmosphere throughout society.

Elections are proof of progress in the reform movement; they are a U-turn from [the] public opinion on elections several years ago

- Saudi participant

Participants emphasized that the elections for municipal councils were a positive step that reinforced this sense of optimism. While the elections were limited in their size, scope and the level of participation, they offered Saudi citizens a unique opportunity to engage each other in substantive discussions of local and national import. The government was considered to be less involved in influencing the electoral process than the private business community; private companies supported candidate campaign activities and encouraged popular participation.

Overall, it was agreed that government initiatives such as the National Dialogue Center of Saudi Arabia and the National Association of Human Rights (NAHR) are important institutions that need to be re-invigorated and whose recommendations should be implemented by the government. It was also agreed that the pace of reform remains slow and the end result is not well defined, even by the government.

IV. COMPARATIVE TRANSITION MODELS

“We want to learn and build on others and participate in the international world; we don’t want to start from zero.”

-Saudi participant

The presence of high-level, experienced political leaders allowed for comparative discussions of models for facilitating reform in Saudi Arabia. Former and current presidents, prime ministers, members of parliament, mayors, political party leaders and activists presented the transitional experiences of Albania, Bahrain, Chile, Lebanon, Morocco, Spain and Sudan; the mix of experiences from democracies and non-democracies helped to keep the discussion focused on realistic benchmarks for Saudi Arabia.

While participants agreed there is no linear model of transition and the experiences presented were not a perfect fit for the context of Saudi Arabia, they were able to share experiences and identify strategies that may be applicable or adapted to meet the needs of reform-minded elements of Saudi society. All of the presentations provided Saudi participants with an increased understanding of how political and civil society transformations move forward as parallel processes.

The Spanish transition provided a good example of positive nation building and reconciliation among different facets in society, while the Chilean transition offered insight into the role of religious institutions and popular economic movements during times of transition. The ongoing experiences of Sudan and other MENA countries demonstrated how lengthy and complex the transition period can be. Each presenter stressed that enduring reform processes must respond to domestic factors such as social values, cultural traditions, religion and economic structures in order for external factors such as international pressure, incentives, partnerships and global markets to be most effective.

Of particular interest to Saudi participants were the roles played by the respective monarchies during times of transition. Spain did not function as a democracy or have a parliament under Spain's authoritarian Head of State Francisco Franco's rule, thus democratic reform had to be established through a top-down approach. After Franco's death, King Juan Carlos realized Spanish citizens' desires for democratic reform and renounced absolute power to assume the role of constitutional monarch. While the government consulted Spaniards about their opinions and perspectives on democratic institutions during the transition, it was the support of King Juan Carlos that encouraged the beginnings of change. Ultimately, the King came to embody the Spanish state and exercised the important function of arbiter of institutional disputes.

King Juan Carlos recognized that the security of the Spanish monarchy depended on relinquishing its political power. The presence of the monarch provided a beneficial separation for citizens between the tradition and emotion of a ceremonial figure and the real power of government. Royal families in the Arab region have been educated in an entirely different cultural setting, one in which the relationships between political, religious, social and cultural dynamics are intertwined. Ensuring the security of the monarchy through the devolution of power and creating a beneficial separation between the popular emotion of ceremony and political power may be a way for them to maintain their status; it is not inconsistent for a constitutional monarch to play a religious role.

In response to concerns of the Saudi participants, former Presidents González and Meidani, former Prime Minister Al-Mahdi, Senator Boeninger and others reiterated that there is always a degree of instability and uncertainty during times of change and as new political structures are developed. In the case of Saudi Arabia and across the MENA region, the process of transformation is likely to be preceded by an increase in religion-based political parties, as religion provides a sense of stability to citizens, but alternative perspectives must be allowed to develop as well. The level of support for political parties and civil society organizations in the Arab world cannot be adequately measured if people cannot fully participate in these systems. For example, only 3,260 people were considered members of the Spanish socialist party in 1974; five years later membership and support had risen to such an extent that more than 12,200 Socialist candidates were elected municipal councilors in the local elections of 1979. People were no longer restricted or afraid of expressing their views.

Former Spanish President Felipe González further summarized the lessons of democratic transitions by saying that democracy cannot be based only on ideological campaigns, but must convince people that they should use elections as a method for resolving conflict, deciding on leaders and making decisions on what should be done. Using elections as a tool to resolve problems will help to further understanding and



bring people closer to a culture of democracy. Thus, local elections in Saudi Arabia may be a significant contribution to the development of reforms because they may have helped set a precedent.

V. CHALLENGES TO REFORM IN SAUDI ARABIA

“The Arab world is now sitting on a time bomb and we don’t know when it is going to explode. This was not the case a decade ago.”

- Saudi participant

It was clear from seminar discussions that Saudi society considers itself to be distinct from many other Middle Eastern and North African countries because of its religious significance to the Islamic world and its significance to world energy markets. The participants in Madrid indicated that, in some respects, these distinctions make reform

even more important to the Kingdom: extremist agendas could not only threaten the reform process but also the general stability and prosperity of the Kingdom. Throughout the discussions, participants identified challenges to the reform process which included the entrenchment of the royal family and religious clerics in positions of power, the strong role of religion in Saudi society and the lack of clear vision regarding what a reformed Saudi Arabia would look like.

Saudi participants characterized the presence of a strong absolute monarchy in Saudi Arabia as the greatest challenge to pushing a popular reform agenda. Efforts made by reform-minded individuals are repeatedly stifled by imprisonment, travel restrictions and other backlash from the government. Saudi citizens are prohibited by law from organizing any type of formal structure without government approval. Because the lack of freedom of expression hinders constructive dialogue on reform measures and allows for only regulated citizen involvement, expanding and protecting freedom of expression will be an essential step in the reform process.

Balancing the role of religion and religious authorities was identified as another challenge to a transition process in Saudi Arabia. Islam is seen as the basis for a constitutional structure of governance, even among many reform-minded individuals. The strong influence of religious figures in the current political system could support or hinder the implementation of reforms and the development of sustained democratic processes. Religious-based parties in the Arab world run the risk of using political power to gain control of government, only to revert to autocratic authority once in power. The Saudi government and reform-minded individuals would need to encourage religious leaders to prevent this reversal of reform in a way that does not de-legitimize the democratic process.

Finally, developing a clear vision of what the end state of reform in the Kingdom would look like is a challenge for the reform movement in Saudi Arabia. The specifics of this vision must incorporate the social, cultural and religious values of Saudi society while maintaining the standards of a modern democratic state. As part of this alternative vision, Saudi participants emphasized that no country can modernize or achieve its full economic and political potential without the full participation of women. Until a reform vision is developed and well-articulated to the government and the people of Saudi Arabia, it will be difficult to mobilize pressure for reform. Senator Boeninger, a Club of Madrid invitee and senator in the National Congress of Chile, noted that in order to develop this alternative vision, members of the reform movement would need to resolve two key relationships for a reformed Saudi Arabia: the power sharing relationship

between the royal family and Saudi citizens and the relationship between politics and religion.

Saudi participants stated that reform-minded individuals are interested in building a consensus on power sharing between the ruling family and citizens rather than seeking to overthrow the regime. This consensus building would include empowerment of those that are weak or have little power today, especially concerning the freedom to build civil society associations. Additionally, participants said, reform-minded individuals seek to find tolerance of culture and diversity to accommodate the problem of politics with religion. If the state holds power over both, then there is no room for citizen participation.

In both the Spanish and Chilean experiences, the development of political parties and civil society helped to support the transition process. In Spain, these entities worked in consultation with the King to further his plans for reform. In Chile, the economic sector helped to push reforms and elections within labor unions and syndicates. The church, a respected power amongst the Chilean citizenry, facilitated understanding between reformists and members of the regime, thus acting as a bridge for dialogue that further supported the transition process. Saudi Arabia may draw from these experiences and implement reforms that enable various economic, political and social circumstances to converge in the process. It may also be useful for Saudi Arabia to examine models of other countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Turkey, who have developed a balance of power that maintains their ethnic diversity and religious values.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NEXT STEPS

Saudi participants identified several key strategies and next steps for strengthening and encouraging the efforts of reform-minded individuals, both within and outside of the Kingdom, including:

- Identifying pockets of opportunity that exist in Saudi Arabia now;
- Reaching out to diverse segments of Saudi society to build common ground;
- Engaging government officials through local councils and political connections; and
- Utilizing opportunities for increased international involvement to mobilize popular support for change.

“Saudi Arabians are living under the same roof and don’t know each other. We are afraid of being discovered. We don’t know what we want and we don’t know what we don’t want.”

-Saudi participant

Participants noted that striking the appropriate balance between the demands of culture and tradition with the requirements of a democratic system of governance will require working within the social- cultural framework that currently exists in the Kingdom. Initiating contacts with civil society, human rights committees, commerce representatives and journalists are a first step toward building

linkages and areas of common ground to move a transition process forward.

Examples were given of increased press freedoms in Saudi Arabia, recognizing the role media plays in creating a culture of democracy and pushing for reform. The Saudi Chamber of Commerce is active in promoting economic integration into the region and

global markets; thus the business community may help to pressure for reform by illustrating how the Kingdom lags behind some of its regional neighbors in trade, technology and use of human resources. Additionally, government agencies may not be able to provide all of the resources to meet people's needs should a political transition process move forward and authority be decentralized. Therefore, civil society organizations could play a role both in providing resources, services and acting as a voice for the community; currently, there are few independent civil society organizations, with most having a religious orientation, so the capacity of such organizations would need to be developed.

“We must realize Saudi society is like others with trends, movements and common goals; religious dominance must be done away with – we must do so from inside

-Saudi participant

In engaging government officials, participants agreed that local elections are important as (1) an exercise in democracy that allows citizens to gain more input into the governance of their country; (2) an opportunity to engage citizens in public policy discussions, thus enhancing their understanding of good governance; and (3) a step towards devolving political and financial power to the local level. Some participants suggested that municipal councils be expanded and integrated into regional and national governments. For this process to take place, council processes would need to be institutionalized and staff given professional training. Ideas for this type of expansion have been discussed in the existing Saudi national dialogue and recommendations have been made; support for those recommendations must be encouraged.

Finally, Saudi participants expressed their frustration with and perception of the international community supporting dictators and absolute monarchies, emphasizing that this pattern must change given the current call for democratic development. They cited the Chilean experience, wherein international support and pressure at the civil

“We can help government through the transition because it is what we believe in for a peaceful transition.”

-Saudi participant

society and academic levels played a role in the transition to democracy. Exiled Chileans, who were initially not supportive of domestic efforts, eventually networked together with supporting international parties and countries, building unity among their community. Academics established a common vision and sought international

assistance to fund their activities. Political pressure through diplomatic relations did not provide much benefit to the democracy movement until the United States, under President Carter, changed its policy toward Chile and placed significant pressure on the regime.

Saudi participants suggested that there is a moral imperative for the international community to support reformers in their efforts. International assistance to help consolidate democracy – through partnerships and outside initiatives – should not encounter opposition from the Saudi government and will help break the isolation of the Kingdom. Suggestions for partnerships and continued engagement with the international community included:

“During the Cold War the USSR was criticized for its lack of human rights but no one mentioned the lack of rights in the Arab world. People have always thought there was an ulterior motive. We need to believe that countries, especially the U.S., really want to help us.”

-Saudi participant

- Further meetings to be held on topics such as surmounting the challenges of reform and strategies for power sharing (which would include examples such as Kuwait and others where the monarchy retains some power but there is a representative body as well);
- Organizations such as NDI and the CoM to work with reform-minded Saudis to establish lines of communication with Saudi officials to facilitate entry into the Kingdom. Such organizations could offer assistance and programs to train and support municipal councils, the journalist syndicate, human rights organizations and the chamber of commerce - areas which are less political but have undergone reform;
- Study exchanges with city councils in the U.S. and Europe to understand how they perform and function, their laws and committees, and ways for developing lower levels of government;
- The “twinning” of Saudi cities with sister cities in other countries. Twinning cities can help with exchanges of people and events, encouraging social mobilization; and
- Developing partnerships with journalists and media outlets in Saudi Arabia to educate, change attitudes, bring about new ideas and spark initiatives.

VII. CONCLUSION

“Links between democracy and Islam need to be further discussed in conferences and seminars so we can learn to Islamize liberalism and liberalize Islamism.”

-Saudi participant

As in the other monarchies of the Middle East and North Africa region, reform-minded individuals in Saudi Arabia are not advocating the dissolution of the royal family, but are seeking avenues for increased public participation in the governance of their country. Reform-minded Saudis are interested in starting a process of modernization and are seeking opportunities to learn about the experiences of others. While the seminar held by NDI and the CoM in Madrid facilitated such a learning opportunity and enabled participants to identify new strategies for promoting reform, there is an understanding amongst Saudis that it will take time to take advantage of the “pockets of freedom” afforded by the recent international focus on democratic development.

The newly established municipal councils offer an avenue for increased participation and cooperation between Saudis and with the international community. For the most part, the recent municipal elections are seen as a progressive step forward; people are open to the types of results the councils may achieve over the next few years.

We are not clear on how to build relations with internationals, to recognize strengths, use the media, and develop strategies so listening to experiences helps to clarify for us.

- Saudi participants

International organizations could work with the Saudi government to provide technical support to the councils as well as opportunities to share experiences with Saudi Arabia on how to further open the reform process.

APPENDIX I - AGENDA

POLITICAL SYSTEMS AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Madrid, Spain. July 11 – 13, 2005

Monday – July 11

Arrival of participants

- 11:30–13:30 Optional Tour and Question & Answer Session at *El Pais* newspaper
- 14:00–16:00 Lunch with delegates
- 16:30 Welcome coffee
- 17:00 Opening Session – Introduction of Participants and Seminar Themes and Objectives
- 18:00 The Spanish Local Government Experience
- 21:00 Welcome Reception and Dinner

Tuesday – July 12

- 9:30 The Spanish Transition Experience
- 11:00 Coffee break
- 11:30 Recent experiences of political change in the Arab World
- 14:00 Lunch
- 16:30 Political and Economic Challenges and Transitions
- 18:00 Coffee break
- 18:30 Thematic Discussions
 - Small Group Discussion: Local Governance
 - Small Group Discussion: Elections, Media and election monitoring
 - Small Group Discussion: Strengthening civil society, and women's participation
- 19:45 Plenary session. Main findings of small group discussions
- 21:00 Optional Dinner

Wednesday-July 13

- 9:30 Review of work and remaining agenda
- 10:00 Comparative experiences on assistance for reform and democratic development
- 11:30 Coffee Break
- 12:00 The role of the Crown in the Spanish transition and in Parliamentary Democracy
- 13:30 Concluding Session
- 14:30 Luncheon at hotel