



PERSPECTIVES

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Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: Women's Suffrage in Saudi Arabia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Saudi Arabia has not been immune to the demands for change sweeping the Arab world. On September 25, 2011, King Abdullah announced that within the next few years women would be appointed to the Consultative Council and be allowed to vote and run for the municipal councils. But is this a significant advancement for Saudi women's rights, or just another instance of the kingdom's "two steps forward, one step back" reform policy?

The so-called Arab Spring raised expectations for liberalization and democratic growth throughout the Middle East. Observers also expected such developments in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The royal family responded to the challenge primarily by using its massive oil wealth to distribute funds to its subjects via salary increases, housing subsidies and several other programs totaling about \$120 billion. Demonstrations were rare, limited primarily to the minority Shiite population in the Eastern Province.

But while it seems that nearly no Saudis seriously entertain the notion of replacing the monarchy with democracy, demands for change appear regularly and have intensified as a result of the demonstrations in the region that began in late 2010. These demands have tended to focus on greater participation in decision making and on women's rights, as for many modern Saudis, the current status of women in the kingdom is an embarrassment.

On September 25, 2011, King Abdullah announced that women would eventually be appointed to the Consultative Council (*Majlis al-Shura*) and, beginning in 2015, would be allowed to vote and run for municipal councils. But is this really a step forward for women in Saudi Arabia?

Context: The Status of Women in Saudi Arabia

Women are still noticeably absent from the public sphere in Saudi Arabia. Public meetings are usually segregated by gender, but less so than in the past. A guardianship system prevents the movement of females without the permission of a male relative (grandfather, father, uncle, brother, husband, son or nephew). Famously, women are forbidden to drive.

But viewed historically, there can be no doubt that since Abdullah began to assert his influence around 1995 while still crown prince, women have made progress, although at an agonizingly slow pace. In certain areas they have penetrated into the public sphere, being allowed, for instance, to observe the Consultative Council (1999). The appointment of a woman as an assistant undersecretary in the Ministry of Education (2000) was another milestone. According to the US Department of State's 2010 Human Rights Report on Saudi Arabia, 2010 saw two women named to the leadership of the Eastern Province's Chamber of Commerce; the previous year, the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce chose a woman as vice chairperson of the board, and another two women were appointed for four-year terms.

Women broadcasters appear on Saudi television. The strictly controlled Saudi press waited until Abdullah discussed the status of women during a speech in the Eastern Province in 2000 before it opened up its pages to even broaching the controversial issue. It is now a favored topic of discussion and a wide variety of views are aired. According to a study by the Researchers' Center for Women's Studies in Riyadh (*Markaz Bahithat li Dirasat al-Mar'a*) that examined Saudi newspapers and websites in January and February 2010, 40 percent of printed articles and 58 percent of website articles dealt with women's issues. Although the study did not compare earlier periods, it was clear that this was a huge jump in the coverage of the subject.

Finally, in 2010, Abdullah faced down conservative clerics opposed to gender mixing (*ikhtilat*) when they protested the opening of the King's own coeducational King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), which Abdullah designed to be a cutting edge research and graduate education facility.

By western standards, of course, this is a dismal situation for women. But the foregoing instances certainly show some change, even if at less than a snail's pace. Given the starting point for women in Saudi Arabia, it is clear that under Abdullah, advancement of the status of women has become a priority.

Ladies, Don't Start Your Engines – Yet

Saudi activists, spurred on by the revolutionary fervor in Egypt and elsewhere, were keen to exploit the situation for some sort of actual gain. The women's rights issue was an obvious choice: activists focused their efforts on getting women the right to vote in the September 29th municipal council elections, and the glaring ban on women driving shouted out for attention.

The long delayed elections had been announced in March as part of Abdullah's response to the Arab uprisings. In April women began organizing a campaign to register to vote, but Abdullah could not be seen as directly acquiescing to their wishes and elections were held – to a feeble turnout – without women voters or candidates. Yet always keen to balance between the conservative and modern forces in Saudi society, just a few days earlier the king announced that women would be able to vote and run in the *next* municipal elections, scheduled for 2015.

Women also organized a demonstrative driving protest on June 17th, which gained much publicity internationally and locally. The protesters called for women to simply get in their cars and drive. Triggering real controversy in the conservative country, a counter-movement on Facebook called on men to beat the women who drove, and ultra-conservative cleric Abd al-Rahman al-Barrak wished these women dead. Forty-two women reportedly took to the road. Several were issued traffic citations while others were detained.

The King's Speech: No 19th Amendment

On September 25th, King Abdullah spoke before the appointed Consultative Council (see [English text](#)) upon the opening of the third year of its fifth term. His speech, which he delivered haltingly – perhaps due to his frailness or the speech impediment for which he was widely known – dropped two bombshells. First, he announced that from the beginning of the Council's next term, scheduled for 2013, he would appoint women to the body. Second, he ordered that women be allowed to run and vote for positions on municipal councils, also beginning from the next term, in 2015. He emphasized that both moves had been considered through consultation with “many of our religious scholars, especially those in the Senior Ulama Council, and others,”

and would be carried out according to Shari'a law. Both announcements met with applause.

These moves were a step forward for women in the kingdom, but were as halting as the king's speech itself. The Consultative Council was in fact powerless (it could discuss issues, but had no influence on government), yet serving on it was prestigious and many of its members were prominent and highly educated. This was the first time women could be appointed to such a socially important body.

But soon it became clear that even this achievement came with a catch: according to Justice Minister Muhammad al-Isa, women would be segregated from the main chamber and would monitor the proceedings via a sound system.

Abdullah's pronouncement on municipal elections carried more weight. Women were going to be equal to men in an important public sphere. But western headlines like the *New York Times'* "Saudi Monarch Grants Women Right to Vote" entirely missed the mark, making Abdullah's move seem as momentous as the 19th amendment to the US Constitution (which prohibited sex-based voting discrimination). It was true, women would be allowed to vote and run for municipal council seats, but these councils dealt with minor issues, and the royal family appointed half of the members. The September 29th elections, held just several days after the big speech, were met with little enthusiasm and low turnout, reflecting the public's assessment that the councils were indeed insignificant.

Nonetheless, this was still a groundbreaking announcement, which was received locally with some enthusiasm. After all, this was a positive step for women's rights. But for others, it was no big deal. "So I can vote, but I can't get a driver's license," said one female resident of Jeddah. While driving represented independence, equality and made a real difference in everyday life, voting was symbolically important but offered no opportunity for real change.

Just two days after Abdullah's speech, a court sentenced a woman to ten lashes for participating in the driving demonstration. The promise for women contained in Abdullah's announcement seemed dashed by the "business as usual" flogging sentence. But true to Saudi Arabia's tribal tradition where the leader can both give and take away as a personal act, Abdullah immediately overturned the verdict, demonstrating his personal magnanimity and bringing hope to the reformers.

Kicking the Ball down the Field

Due to Abdullah's old age and ill health, he will possibly not even be around to see a woman in the Consultative Council or run for a municipal council slot. The crown prince, Sultan, is an ailing octogenarian. The next in line, Interior Minister Nayif, is significantly younger, but infinitely more conservative. He might yield to religious establishment figures who apparently had not been consulted by Abdullah. Senior Ulama Council member Shaykh Salih al-Luhaydan said on a Saudi television station, "I wish the king did not say that he consulted senior clerics... When I heard the speech and what was said about consultation, without a doubt I had no knowledge of it."

While Luhaydan did not directly criticize King Abdullah's decisions, he did quote an Arabic proverb cautioning that "the thread between a leader and his people will snap if it is pulled too hard." This warning highlights the thin line walked by the leadership of the Saudi royal family, which supports gradual reform without political participation. The family is still guided by the need to balance liberalization with the demands of its conservative base.

Many changes could take place before the 2015 municipal elections. In his latest move, King Abdullah has simply carried out another iteration of the royal family's "two steps forward one step back" process of reform.

Saudi society is very conservative and many understand that change must come slowly. No one really wants to see the kind of turmoil and instability witnessed in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Syria. Those who are more or less pleased with the present system will be satisfied with King Abdullah's gestures. But the younger generation, excited by the possibility of change brought from below, as in Egypt, is unlikely to be convinced. They will continue to press for accelerated reform, but are also aware of the limitations imposed by Saudi society and the ironclad grip of the Saudi royal family on power.

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