

Saudi Arabia: Women's exclusion from elections undermines progress

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Saudi Arabia is gearing up for the country's first nationwide municipal elections early next year, but half of the population will not be taking part. Women have been excluded. This is contrary to the country's election law, which does not explicitly ban women from taking part.

The exclusion also undermines recent positive developments in the country, such as the much publicised "National Dialogue", which included a focus on women's rights and their ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The ratification in October 2000 was done without reservation about Article 7 on political participation.

Registration for the elections, for which candidates are already running, will begin this month. The elections will allow voters to choose half of the members of the municipal councils; the other half will be appointed by the government.

Saudi Arabia's electoral law is clear about women's participation. The law uses the word "citizen" -- in Arabic, this refers to both men and women in indicating those eligible to vote. Despite this, Interior Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdel Aziz announced last month that women would not be allowed to take part in the elections, saying "I don't think that women's participation is possible."

The Head of the Election Committee, Prince Mut'ab bin Abdul Aziz, said, "I expect women to participate in elections in future stages, after conducting studies to assess whether it is useful or not." Amnesty International opposes Saudi Arabia's plans to ban women from participation in the forthcoming elections and believes that the right to universal suffrage is a fundamental right that must not be delayed.

For Saudi Arabia, the elections are a positive development; unfortunately, for Saudi Arabia's women, they're another setback.

Despite this, women have become more vocal in asking for more equal rights. Last year, three women were allowed to take positions on the board of the country's first human rights committee and this year, a woman was elected to the Board of Directors of the Journalist Union. In addition, a number of women expressed their wish to run as candidates for the municipal elections before they were blocked by the official announcement.

In Saudi Arabia, not only are women being blocked from participating in politics, they are not permitted to move freely without the company of an immediate male relative (*Mahram*), even to seek urgent medical attention.

A simple activity like walking down the street is prohibited for women who are not allowed to walk in public without the company of a *Mahram*. Breaching these codes gives rise to suspicion of prostitution and may result in arrest, brutality, and torture by police, particularly the religious police (*Mutawa'een*), who patrol the streets monitoring, among other things, women's conduct or dress or behaviour.

Further gender-based restrictions on the freedom of movement include the prohibition on women driving cars. Fourteen years ago, 47 women took part in an unprecedented protest against what was then customary law. They drove a convoy of cars in Riyadh and were immediately arrested and detained for hours. They were released only after their male relatives signed undertakings that the women would not violate the ban again.

Those among them who had jobs in the public sector were dismissed from their jobs by a royal decree. A *fatwa* (religious ruling) was issued by the senior council of *Ulama* (Clerics) stating that women were not allowed to drive. This was followed by a government statement supporting the *fatwa* and warning of punishment for women who do not respect it. Opposition to the ban is growing once again as the economy opens up and more women find work.

The country's Labour Minister announced in May 2004 that women may carry out business activities without the need for a *wakil* (representative). Although the impact of this decision is still unclear, AI welcomes all steps that seek to reduce restrictions against women's right to work and lessen discrimination against women.

Women in Saudi Arabia continue to challenge many severe forms of discrimination in the fields of personal status, employment, participation in public life, the subordination of women to men, and restrictions on their freedom of movement.

One of Amnesty International's key demands has been for the government of Saudi Arabia to amend all discriminatory laws against women and foreign workers in accordance with CEDAW. Saudi Arabia's ratification of CEDAW should mean that it has accepted its responsibility to improve women's human rights situation in the country. It is imperative that these improvements are made if the country wishes further its' engagement with the international community.

TAKE ACTION!

Write to the Head of the Election Committee and the Minister of Interior, calling for women in Saudi Arabia to be given their basic fundamental right to universal suffrage without delay. In your appeals:

- call on the authorities to ensure and encourage the full, equal and unhindered participation of women in the forthcoming elections, both as voters and as candidates, immediately;
- urge the authorities to ensure that both men and women are represented equally in the nationwide municipal elections and in appointment to the municipal councils;
- remind the authorities of their international obligations in accordance with the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), to which Saudi Arabia a state party, making particular reference to Article 7 which states that state parties must:

"Take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country, and in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms to men, the right:

(a) To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies;

(b) To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government".

Please send appeals to the Head of the Election Committee, Prince Mut'ab bin Abdul Aziz and the Minister of Interior, Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz, , at the following address. If you have further resources, please also send appeals to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Crown Prince at the addresses below.

His Royal Highness Prince Mut'ab bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud
The Head of the Election Committee and the Minister of Rural and Municipal Affairs
Ministry of Rural and Municipal Affairs
P.O. Box 955
Riyadh 11136
Saudi Arabia
Tel + 966 1 4569999
Fax + 966 1 4563196
Email: info@momra.gov.sa

Salutation: Your Royal Highness

His Royal Highness Prince Naif bin 'Abdul 'Aziz Al-Saud
Minister of Interior
Ministry of Interior
P.O. Box 2933
Airport Road

Riyadh 11134
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Tel: + 966 1 401 1944
Fax: + 966 1 403 1185

Salutation: Your Royal Highness

His Royal Highness Prince Saud al-Faisal bin 'Abdul 'Aziz Al-Saud
Minister of Foreign Affairs
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Nasseriya Street
Riyadh 11124
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Salutation: Your Royal Highness

His Royal Highness Prince Abdullah bin 'Abdul 'Aziz Al-Saud
Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister & Commander of the National Guard
Royal Court
Riyadh
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Telegram: H.R.H. Prince Abdullah, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
Tel: + 966 1 491 5400

Salutation: Your Royal Highness