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ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

Reports

Women Participation in Saudi Arabia's Political Arena

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The decision to allow women to participate in the Majlis Ash- Shura council and municipal councils of Saudi Arabia is an important step forward, especially given that Saudi Arabia is in dire need of any movement regarding this issue. At the same time, however, such a step is not expected to bring about concrete and effective changes, given the limitations of realities on the ground. Furthermore, predominant popular and cultural perceptions of the Shura and municipal councils in the kingdom is that they offer no room for any real and meaningful participation in the political decision-making of the state.

The deviation of a Politician and Cleric

On 25th September, the Saudi monarch, King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, issued a decree that allowed Saudi women to enter the shura council and be nominated for candidacy in municipal elections. This decision was consistent with a series of transformative royal decrees issued since Abdullah's ascendancy to the throne in 2005. The main features of the course charted by these reforms became manifest shortly before his reign while he was still crown prince.

Among the decisions issued during King Abdullah's reign were a few that touched upon the issue of women in the Kingdom, making ripples in the previously stagnant waters of Saudi women's rights. It was during this period that Saudi women were issued national identity cards; policy and legislation were passed in the interests of women; and jobs such as in passport administration, civil defence, the state human rights commission and the Ministry of Trade and Industry opened up to women. Women were also made eligible to run for election in the Chamber of Commerce and the engineers' and journalists' unions. During this period, a woman was appointed deputy minister of education (becoming the first woman to hold the rank of minister), and another was appointed university director for the first women's university in Saudi Arabia (Princess Noura bint Abdul Rahman University). In recent years, women overtook men as the majority of the country's university graduates. Furthermore, according to a report last year by the Planning and Information Department of the Ministry of Higher Education, higher education scholarships for women have increased to a point where more women than men are receiving state scholarships for studies at the master's level.

Such decisions were not qualitatively enough to change Saudi women's political and social realities. Even the recent decision to include women in the state's political life could not have been achieved in contemporary Saudi Arabia had it not been issued by the King himself. Any step with the potential to change the condition of the Kingdom's women is bound to face strong opposition from the powerful religious establishment. For example, a labour ministry decision several years ago that allowed for women to work in women's supplies stores remains deterred. There has also been an effort to ban the employment of women as cashiers in large shopping malls on the basis of a fatwa issued by the Council of Senior Ulama (religious scholars) that prohibits women from working in "mixed" spaces.

Political decisions concerning women indicate a deviation between the religious establishment and clerical elite on the one hand, and the political decision-making apparatus of the state on the other. This step is similar to the government's establishment of the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) without consulting the clergy and thus limiting their authority.

The royal decree allowing for the involvement of women in politics was met with reservation by many Saudi clerics. A brief commentary by the grand mufti of the Kingdom includes none of the usual explicit or implicit approbation for it, although it is reserved in its explicit criticism of the decision. A broad swath of the Kingdom's clerics shared this reluctance to criticise the decision, especially in light of clear statements by the King recently directed at those who criticise figureheads of the Saudi regime. Despite this, however, there has been opposition to the decision from influential religious leaders, notably Sheikh Saleh al-Luhaidan, a member of the Council of Senior Ulama and former president of the Supreme Judicial Council. In a televised interview on al-Majd satellite channel, al-Luhaidan said he wished the King had not mentioned his

consultation of the council, as he had not known of the decree until after the king's public proclamation that the decision had been made effective.

This clerical reticence is a result of a phenomenon in which the political leadership finds itself obliged to take expansive steps towards reform, while the religious leadership remains reluctant, responding to change with fear and concern. In the words of Saudi researcher Khaled al-Dakhil, the state's vision has broadened and expanded, while that of the clergy is frozen and no longer able to accommodate the state's vision. Herein lies the greatest potential impact of this decision and others like it: the deviation of the political and the religious. This change in the nature of the historic connection between the two can unleash the potential for broader change in the country, on the grounds that the prevailing structure of the Saudi regime cannot remain unchanged if there is a true transformation in the relationship between the politician and the cleric on which this structure has historically been based.

Motivations behind the Decision

There are three possible motivating factors that led to the decision that bypasses the dominant social and religious norms of the Kingdom to allow women into the shura and municipal councils. The first of these is the Kingdom's image abroad, especially in light of its accession to the World Trade Organization and its signing and ratification of the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). A second factor is the feminist and cultural effort in the Kingdom that has agitated the implementation of women's demands, voicing sharp criticism of the continuing discrimination against, and disregard for, women's rights. Both factors are likely to have some influence, but there is no clear evidence that either has had direct impact on political authorities. Their significance does not compare to the importance of the third factor that has direct bearing on this issue: the difficult conditions faced by Saudi women that manifest whenever the state attempts to take steps towards development.

Saudi women have proved their ability to succeed in a multitude of educational, medical, cultural and other fields in which they have had the opportunity to engage and participate. At the same time, however, there have been other fields from which they have been completely excluded, and still others in which male agents are required to act on their behalf, or provide them with authorisation. A Saudi woman, for example, needs authorisation from a male guardian to be issued an identity card. This is in addition to the absence of strong legislation on women's legal and civic rights pertaining to issues such as determination of the age of adulthood for women that would enable them to be legal persons without the need of a male guardian or a mahram (husband or family member to whom a woman cannot be married); the issue of under-age marriage; custody of children; issues relating to family disputes and other matters.

The Saudi woman, whose entry into political life some may now celebrate, is still not allowed to drive her car to open the shop that she owns and operates. In a normal situation, this would be a natural right that is no less than that of her male compatriot. It can be said that other rights, such as that of political participation, are secondary to this most basic and fundamental right.

Women, who constitute half of Saudi society, have yet to attain representation and presence at a level higher than that of a deputy minister. Saudi women, representing the majority of graduates from Saudi universities (56.5 percent) represent only fourteen percent of the workforce according to a study issued last year(1). The same study indicates that the number of unemployed female PhD holders has reached 1,000. This explains the crux of the issue: it is not a matter of capability and education as much as it is a matter of women having limited or no prospects and opportunities. In other words, the structures reproduced in the state do not attach the importance to women that befits their presence and capabilities.

Furthermore, women have not been able to become an effective and capable force with a developed identity and clear strategy. This is for the same reason that they have lacked what their male compatriots lack, the ability to form civic non-governmental associations to support activists, crystallise their efforts and enable the emergence of organised pressure, representation and follow-up, rather than simply monitoring government decisions that are advantageous at times and injurious at others.

These are some of the thorny issues that have accumulated along Saudi women's path, hindering their self-realisation, the imposition of their presence and creative social interaction. This situation was clear to the Saudi government, which tried to mitigate it with political decisions including this recent one. While recognising this as a step forward, a deeper examination shows that it is unlikely to have a practical positive impact on women in terms of their equality and rights.

Practical Impact of the Decision

It is unlikely that the decision to include women in the shura and municipal councils will produce real change on the ground. It comes at a time when women's opportunities have been curtailed, and the space through which the actualisation of their social and political participation and capitalisation on such decisions is largely absent. The timing of the decision coincided with events that contradicted its symbolic significance and transformative power: the day after the decision was announced, a judge sentenced a woman to be flogged because she drove a car. Commenting on the royal decision, a member of the Council of Senior Ulama, Sheikh Abdullah Al Manee, said women may be allowed to enter to the Shura Council, but would have to be on another floor of the council chambers, and Justice Minister Mohammad al-Issa said women's participation in the council would be limited to "the vote".

The weakness of practical impact is to be expected for two reasons: first, the generally weak position of women in the structures of social and political organisation in the state, and, second, the fact that the popular and cultural attitude in Saudi Arabia towards the shura and municipal councils is one that dismisses these bodies as non-independent ornamental bodies with no binding legislative authority.

The weakness of the status of women has intensified with time because of increased religiosity and political marginalisation. This weakness is a function of two historical factors whose presence has been central in shaping the nature of the kingdom. The first is the relationship between the political and religious authorities while the second is the impact of oil.

Regarding the first factor, the close alliance between the politician and the cleric was forged on the basis of Shari'ah (Islamic jurisprudence). This gave the clergy much space to mould the social landscape. Women had been at the centre of this landscape, and women's opportunities were thus determined according to a dynamic that clerics, with their penchant for circumscribing and forbidding, formulated and shaped. Saudi scholar Abdul Aziz al-Khadher attributes the obstruction of progress on women's issues in the kingdom to Saudi political authorities' desire to satisfy and win over the conservative religious current in the country. He argues that this dynamic cannot continue interminably as the status of women in its traditional form is no longer acceptable in modern society(2).

The second factor relates to the political economy of the kingdom, and particularly the centrality of its oil revenues. This has played a role in the marginalisation of women, narrowing the space in which they can work and participate. Mohammed al-Rumaihi refers to the Gulf states as characterised by a system of rentier patriarchy(3). These have been known to be patriarchal because of the extended tribal structures of their societies, a by-product of which was the marginalisation of the individual and the woman. The era of oil revenues played a central role in the preservation and intensification of this patriarchy.

Religious culture and oil are the most striking features of the Kingdom, and constitute the foundations of its existence. While these factors have occasionally been of service to the Saudi woman, they have predominantly worked to bring about her exclusion. It is no coincidence that Saudi universities that specialise in these two fields of study (the Islamic University and the University of Petroleum and Minerals) are off-limits to women.

In a study about oil and women, political economy professor Michael Ross of the University of California argued that there was an inverse relationship between oil and women's social and political opportunities. The Middle East's dire record in women's rights and equality, he argued, was not due to the legacy of Islamic culture, as many western commentators would have it, but is rather attributable to oil(4). He concluded that the idea that 'development leads to equality' was not valid in all cases, but depended on the type of development. Development that was dependent on oil and mineral revenues allowed for the preservation of patriarchal norms, laws and institutions in a society. He showed that similar impacts of oil on the status of women in oil-rich countries applied outside the Middle East in places like Nigeria, Botswana, Russia and Chile.

Ross's research includes statistical data that show the existing relationships between oil and the impact on the work patterns of women and their opportunities for political representation. The data show that the emergence of the Saudi oil industry directly yielded a drop in the proportion of women in the labour force and decision-making authority, an apparent characteristic of Gulf societies. Before the oil era, women were an essential part of agricultural production and commerce; they were not socially isolated in the stark ways we see today. Indeed, in some areas of Saudi Arabia, the covering of women's faces was not prevalent until after 1980 – after the Islamic revolution in Iran and the famous incident in the Grand Mosque in Makkah that led to increased conservatism. There can be no doubt that the reduction of women's work opportunities reduces their influence in the family, as family income is more likely to be generated by a male member of the household.

There is another reason to expect that the practical impact of the decision to allow women's participation in political life will be weak: the councils in which women will be allowed to participate (the shura council after two years and the municipal councils after four) are weak bodies to begin with. These councils are not revered, respected or regarded by the people as forums that pass powerful and binding state decisions, nor are they seen as providing an arena for the participation and engagement to which citizens aspire. This explains the low voter turnout in the second round of municipal elections as compared to the high number of registrants for the first round of elections, a comparison that reveals voters' perceptions of the failure and uselessness of Saudi electoral processes.

Indeed, popular reluctance to be involved in the second round of municipal elections that took place last September were a defining feature of that episode, whether in terms of the low number of new voters registered or in terms of the small number of candidates. In Jeddah, for example, the number of candidates was 124 in the second round of elections, while in the first the number was four times as high. Ninety-five percent of the incumbent council members did not run for re-election, thus confirming the lack of faith in the process by those closest to it. There was also a low voter turnout. Only 432,559 out of approximately three million eligible voters participated, representing a voter turnout of fourteen percent.

Areas for Reform

The boycott of the municipal elections was not just the result of an oversight by average citizens, or a reaction of the intelligentsia to the failure of the electoral experience. It was also the outcome of a campaign that had been planned months before by a group of youth and cultural activists who issued the 'Declaration of the Boycott of Saudi Municipal Elections' in May 2010. In its declaration, the group said it would boycott the municipal elections because the format of the elections did not satisfy the aspirations for "the expansion of popular participation in decision-making that was expressed in the various

statements of reform that call for the election of a parliament with broad legislative and regulatory powers, and that meet the popular thirst for comprehensive and full democratic practice".

From the group's statements over the past year, it becomes clear that the discourse of those calling for reform is focused on several key issues: unemployment, housing, institutional reform and popular political participation, and the issue of prisoners of conscience and prisoners held without trial. This reformist discourse does not consider recent political decisions to be evidence of progress towards real political participation. Consequently, the recent decision on the participation of women was not celebrated, as the experience of women in these councils can at most be equal to that of their male predecessors, namely, the realisation of the ineffectiveness of the elected. Moreover, the decision came at a time when reform movements were campaigning to expand the powers of these councils and make them independent and fully elected.

The lack of a path and a space through which women can engage in the political process renders decisions supporting women's rights akin to a car with no road to drive upon. It can only remain still, hovering over the same space. It will remain difficult to capitalise on these decisions in the confining context in which the elites – particularly the political and religious elites – are to be held responsible.

Saudi women have not been able to create and consolidate an identity of mass struggle in Saudi Arabia because of this lack of space. The two main obstacles impeding progress on women's rights are the ones discussed above: religious thought in the state and the state's political economy.

To overcome these obstacles, the most suitable cultural and activist option available to women is primarily to seek reform. The engagement and representation of women in the Saudi reform movement, which has been increasingly visible in recent years, will establish a mutually reinforcing dynamic between the reform movement and women's efforts to demand and win their rights. The reform movement aims to bring about institutional and legal change in the kingdom. It is committed to the renewal of religious thought, seeing this as a prerequisite for social and cultural change. The constitutional monarchy option, for example, will enable the opening up of social, political and economic structures to one another, which will lead to the re-institutionalisation and reformulation of laws and regulations. It is possible to ensure that such change adopts women's rights in a clear and significant manner, in contrast to the marginalisation that characterises the current situation.

In conclusion, women will not be able to succeed and find the space to voice their demands and act to achieve them if they are not present and active in these institutions in ways that will help to push forward the renewal of religious thought, and find appropriate forms for the country's political economy that will ensure a role for the individual citizen, whether man or woman. Any success for women in bringing about change in these two areas has the potential to reverberate more broadly, affecting the entire society and the network of social relations. If and when this is achieved, the restructuring of society will be one from which all will benefit.

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