

COMMENTARY

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Saudi Women to Vote in Future?

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Hussein Shobokshi, a popular Saudi columnist, was banned from writing after he published an article that looked forward to the day when his daughter would drive him to a polling booth. The piece ruffled a few feathers as the Saudi women could not drive and the men could not vote. That was some years ago.

Since then the Saudis have voted for municipal councils, an experiment that remained in hibernation till very recently. As for the women driving in the country, there was a flurry of expectations a few years back. Soon after inheriting the Saudi monarchy, King Abdullah said that the Saudi women would “one day be able to drive.” Young girls, since then, have taken to simulated driving lessons readying for that day. Some have gone further. They have driven and pasted the videos of themselves behind the wheels on the YouTube and other social networks. Their cases are pending before the courts and they will not go unpunished. Defiance is not tolerated, even though there is increasing support on the issue at the popular level.

The women have made limited advances on electoral participation in the meanwhile. Lama al-Sulaiman and Nashwa Taher hold elected positions on the twelve-member Board of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce; and Nadia Bakhurji has won a seat on the ten-member Board of the Saudi Engineers Council.

On 25 September, in a five-minute speech televised live King Abdullah announced that he was granting women the right to vote in future municipal elections, the right to run as candidates, and

that they would be appointed to the Shura Council, the 150-member body that advises the king on legislation and policy.

There was an instant approval for the statement by the White House, the European Union and the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The Arab-watchers have been cautious in assessing the real meaning of the statement and its future prospects. The Saudi women are reported to be excited about it. Though some are sceptical, and some more cynical.

All members of the Shura Council are appointed by the King. Their mandate is to advise, not to vote on legislation nor to veto one. In 2006, six women were appointed to the Shura Council for the first time and their number has gone up to twelve at present. The number may go up further in future. The Council would remain an advisory body, nevertheless.

As for the municipal council elections, they were held on 29 September, just a few days back. This is the second experiment in voting after 2005. Half the seats are being contested; the other half will be the royal appointees. A lack of polling stations and the fact that only 50 per cent of Saudi women at the time had photo ID-cards, meant that they were excluded from the 2005 polls. Women are not voting this time around either. They will have to wait till the third municipal council is voted in. That would be in 2015.

The Saudi women live under the guardianship of their male relatives. Their decisions to get education, to work, to travel or to receive health care must be endorsed by their guardians. Would the right to vote also be with the consent of the guardian?

Could the King's offer be a Saudi response to the "Arab Spring" that has overthrown three Arab dictators to date and is threatening many more? The Saudi King has allocated US\$130 billion towards social benefits to stave off a home-grown uprising and has sent 1,500-strong troop to quell the one in Bahrain.

Could there be a give-and take here: Women could vote in 2015, if they refrain from driving at present? Shaima Jastaina, convicted for the crime of driving and sentenced to lashings has been pardoned by the King. The future woman driver may not necessarily be shown royal generosity.

There is dispute over the very wording of the King's speech in the meanwhile. He is reported to have read the beginning of the prepared speech and handed over the full text as the "have read." There are different versions of the written text. There is disagreement over whether he read the beginning of the text or he was saying it extempore. Till the statement is put in a royal decree, we would have to wait, before making a definitive judgement. And, in any case, the statement would only make the Saudi women as politically less empowered as their male counterparts – in the best of circumstances!

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