

Saudi women to be given right to vote and stand in elections in four years

Thursday 29 September 2011, by [CHULOV Martin](#), [DAVIES Lizzy](#) (Date first published: 25 September 2011).

King Abdullah's 'cautious reform' will not take effect until 2015 but welcomed as cultural shift in conservative Islamic country.

Women in Saudi Arabia will be given the right to vote and to stand for election within four years, King Abdullah announced on Sunday, in a cultural shift that appears to mark a new era in the rigidly conservative Islamic kingdom.

The right to vote in council elections will not take effect until 2015, and women will still be banned from casting ballots in elections this Thursday.

However, the 87-year-old monarch has invited women to take part in the next shura council, a governing body that supervises legislation.

King Abdullah has been trying to implement what he has described as "cautious reform" in the fundamentalist state, where women are strictly denied civic freedoms or any public role.

"Because we refuse to marginalise women in society in all roles that comply with sharia, we have decided, after deliberation with our senior ulama (clerics) and others ... to involve women in the shura council as members, starting from the next term," he said in a speech.

"Women will be able to run as candidates in the municipal election and will even have a right to vote."

Commentators in Saudi Arabia mostly reacted warmly to the announcement, but said broader change was needed to bring Saudi Arabia into line with other countries. Several said the move was a litmus test of the country's appetite for more far-reaching reform.

"So I can vote, but I can't get a driver's licence," said one Saudi woman from Jeddah, who said she had to remain anonymous. "If I use my name I may be breaching the guardianship law here."

Laws demand that a male guardian - a father, brother, or son - accompany women on any trip outside the house. When some women in Riyadh attempted to test it earlier in the year by driving cars, the move was seen as a provocation by authorities and several of the drivers were arrested. Separation of the sexes in public is also strictly enforced.

Some Saudi observers say the announcement on Sunday is a nod to the popular participation showcased by the Arab spring that has led to revolts elsewhere in the region. However, democratic themes have so far won little resonance in Saudi Arabia, which is ruled by an absolute monarchy that defers to the Qur'an as the country's constitution.

King Abdullah emerged as a supporter of women playing a greater role in Saudi society two years

ago when he was photographed with a group of young female students, none of whom wore the full niqab (face cover) common in Saudi society.

He has since backed the establishment of a non-segregated university and has discussed appointing more women to senior positions. Both moves have drawn criticism from senior clerics and even members of the ruling family.

An academic at a Riyadh University said she remained sceptical that the reforms would be implemented in time for the 2015 municipal vote.

"The possibility for political participation is open, because it being discussed," she said. "But I am not sure if it will happen. I would love to be able to vote, and think women will flock to the polls [if given the chance]. But I don't think many will run [as candidates]." "I respect the king for trying to make a change," she said. "This might encourage women, but they will have to fight hard against social conservatism, even if legally they are allowed to run." "The academic said the Arab spring had created a "sense of embarrassment that so much change is happening all around and the kingdom is standing still".

However, she claimed that the wholesale democratic freedoms being demanded in North Africa and on Saudi Arabia's borders, in Yemen and in Bahrain, would not suit the desert kingdom.

"Saudis do not want to change the royal family," she said. "They want ... change, but under the family's stewardship."

A Jeddah-based female member of the ruling family said: "People have it good here. They are sensible enough to know what to demand and what not to. What the king has done is a very good thing, but he knows and we all know that you cannot push a society like this too far too soon." "The west has come to understand that too. Democracy is something that will take the light of generations to arrive here."

Martin Chulov

Suffrage yet? Women's rights around the world

King Abdullah may have been keen to sell Sunday's move as a giant leap for Saudi womankind, but to the rest of the world it looked like a very small step. In its determination to formally disenfranchise the entire female population, Saudi Arabia had stuck out like a sore thumb even among countries not distinguished by shining women's rights records. Only in the Vatican City - where only cardinals can vote in papal conclaves - have women's chances of going to the ballot box been so slim.

In Burma, which in 2010 held its first national election for 20 years, women went to the polls - for all the good it did them. In Bahrain, they have been able to vote and stand as candidates since 2002. Bhutan, when it held its first elections in 2007, gave women as well as men the right to vote. Even in the sultanate of Brunei, which has denied the vote to all citizens for decades, the female population women will theoretically have the right to vote along with their menfolk in the event that long-promised elections are held.

In much of the world, the picture remains mixed. In the UAE, which held its first elections in 2006, women are now able to vote, although this is far from universal, as the electorate is hand-picked by the authorities. In elections to the federal national council on Saturday, women made up 46% of the electoral college, and one of the 20 seats up for grabs on the council went to Sheikha Isa Ghanem Al Ari, a female candidate.

While progress has been made from a legal perspective, many women are still disenfranchised in practice, particularly in countries where security is poor. In Afghanistan, violence and the influence of the Taliban in certain areas meant female turnout in the 2009 presidential election was low. In one area with an estimated population of between 35,000 and 50,000, the district governor said no women had voted at all.

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P.S.

* From guardian.co.uk, Sunday 25 September 2011 20.30 BST:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/sep/25/saudi-women-right-to-vote>