

All the King's Women

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

A new royal decree giving women the right to vote can't hide the decay in the House of Saud.

Articles enumerating the advances in women's rights in Saudi Arabia have, until now, tended to be rather short. There simply hasn't been much to write about: Saudi women haven't had many rights, at least not in terms Westerners usually understand -- the right to vote, the right to drive, or the right to travel without a male guardian. But with King Abdullah's royal decree on Sunday, Sept. 25, granting women the right to vote in municipal elections, there has now been a river of commentary placing this reform in the context of the upheaval elsewhere in the Arab world. This news, however, does not justify the tediously high word counts that the commentariat will undoubtedly reach over the next few days.

King Abdullah's edict is certainly a change. It might even be progress. But some caution is necessary. Women will not actually be allowed to vote until municipal elections in 2015 -- when they will also be allowed to stand as candidates. In Saudi Arabia's nascent parliament, the appointed consultative council, change will come earlier: Women will be allowed to serve in the next session, which will begin in 2012.

The delay might matter. King Abdullah is 88 years old and has a variety of ailments. He might not be around this time next year. His nominated successor, Crown Prince Sultan, 87, is even less likely to be alive then; he currently resides in a New York City hospital and is believed to be terminally ill. The apparent next in line, the conservative Prince Nayef, likely has a different attitude toward women's rights. In the past he has spoken out against the nascent campaign to allow women to drive.

Saudi watchers, certainly including yours truly, didn't see this announcement coming. King Abdullah's reputation as a reformer has dimmed in recent years. He doesn't seem to have the energy to push for the needed consensus in the royal family and, more particularly, from the kingdom's orthodox Sunni Islam clerical hierarchy. But the monarch did attempt to bridge these divides by painting the change as completely compatible with Islamic tradition. "All

people know that Muslim women have had in the Islamic history, positions that cannot be marginalized," he said, going on to note women's contributions since the time of the Prophet Mohammed.

This reform, however, was the exception rather than the rule. In fact, King Abdullah hasn't seemed to be making any decisions recently. A diplomatic friend recently described the monarch as "lucid for only a couple of hours a day." And last week, there was what seemed to be the height of Saudi indecision: Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh was allowed to return home from a Saudi hospital after recovering from injuries sustained nearly four months ago -- despite an apparent agreement between Riyadh and Washington that, for the future good of troubled Yemen, this shouldn't happen.

Whoever made the decision to ship Saleh back to Yemen is as of yet unclear, but credit for women's voting rights should probably be given to the king's daughter, Adila, who has been a known advocate of her gender's increased participation in public life, particularly driving, for several years. Adila was also seen as being the moving force in the 2009 appointment of Norah al-Faiz as a deputy minister of education -- the first woman to achieve such prominence in government. But, apart from allowing Adila to speak out, King Abdullah himself has hardly been noted for behavior toward women that would pass for enlightened in most other parts of the world.

In my 1994 study of Saudi royals, *After King Fahd: Succession in Saudi Arabia* ([/templateC04.php?CID=15](#)), I included a cheeky footnote pointing out that then Crown Prince Abdullah had the full Islamic complement of four wives, "two of whom were semi-permanent and the other two 'rolled-over.'" Good taste inhibited me from including the same information in my updated 2009 study, *After King Abdullah: Succession in Saudi Arabia* ([/templateC04.php?CID=315](#)).

The king's replenishment of wives, however, is having a notable effect on the House of Saud's ever-growing family tree. The king's youngest son, Badr, was fathered when the monarch must have been in his late 70s. And I have since discovered that Sahab, the daughter who married (or was married off to) a son of Bahrain's King Hamad this summer, was only born in 1993, when King Abdullah would have been 70 years old.

How did King Abdullah manage to be so (pro)creative? No sniggering please but, via WikiLeaks, the State Department has provided us with a possible answer. A 2008 cable from the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh reports that King Abdullah "remains a heavy smoker, regularly receives hormone injections and 'uses Viagra excessively.'"

So, the essential question remains: Is this the country Saudi women want to vote for?

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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