

# Saudi Municipal Elections: Royal Caution and Citizen Apathy

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

**D**ecember 22 was the last day Saudi men could register to vote in municipal elections due to be held February 10 in the capital, Riyadh, and the surrounding area. Despite continuing outbreaks of al-Qaeda-related terrorism (nine terrorists were killed in clashes after two car bombs exploded in Riyadh on December 29), plans for the three-stage elections, staggered across the kingdom from February to April, remain intact. The main danger appears to be citizen apathy.

### Attitudes Toward the Elections

Although a form of local elected assembly existed in some parts of Saudi Arabia until the 1960s, the new system of half-elected/half-appointed councils will be an innovation for this deeply conservative country more at ease with tribal and extended-family systems of politics, both of which have been dominated for a century by the House of Saud. In this context, the 2005 municipal elections can be seen as the Saudi royal family's response to internal pressure from liberals and external pressure from the United States.

Despite a population census in 2004, there is no definite count of the number of men eligible to vote in the province of Riyadh. Press reports variously estimate the size of the constituency of men over 21, not in the military, and living in the area for the last 12 months as between 400,000 and 600,000. The number who registered, however, was declared on December 25 to be "more than 149,000," perhaps 25-35 percent of those eligible. (One Saudi newspaper reported the level of registration as ranging from 9 to 19 percent in different areas of the capital.) Even the 149,000 figure does not sustain much scrutiny. An Associated Press correspondent reported on December 20 that "only about 100,000 . . . had registered." Then local reporters of the Arab News wrote on December 23 that as "registration in Riyadh concluded yesterday, only 130,000 had registered their names."

Voter reluctance, or ignorance, has to be contrasted, though, with candidate enthusiasm. On January 2, the local Saudi Gazette newspaper reported that 698 candidates had filed their nomination papers in the capital alone -- where they will be competing for just seven seats on the city council. (Some 80,000 of the registered 149,000 voters in Riyadh province live in Riyadh city.) The announcement of the initial list of candidates will be made in early

January, with a final list, allowing for disqualifications and withdrawals, being posted on January 29, after which campaigning will be allowed.

The approach of the Saudi royal family to the whole process has varied. Individual junior princes have been reported as registering to vote; their fathers, who dominate the government, appear to be distancing themselves. The assistant minister for local government, Prince Dr. Mansour bin Mitab (the son of the local government minister, Prince Mitab), has been an enthusiastic organizer, doubling as the chairman of the General Committee of Saudi Municipal Elections and holding online interactive forums in both Arabic and English at the Web site [www.saudielections.com](http://www.saudielections.com). (The site claims to have had over one million hits, but a mere 93 people have signed on as members of the English language area, mostly under what appear to be false names.)

### Criticism of Government Policy

So far candidates appear to have carefully limited their criticism. A Saudi businessman in Riyadh, among the first to file nomination papers, was quoted as saying he wanted to promote cultural and sports activities for youths. He offered criticism of "chronic problems such as overflowing drainage, frequent diggings of roads for continual maintenance works [and] potholes due to improper asphaltting" -- all of which are issues already made public by the Riyadh Development Authority.

But the election process offers the prospects of more extensive criticism. The prominent Saudi businessman Prince Alwaleed bin Talal said after he had registered that "municipal elections are stepping stones for major elections." Responding to a question about women -- who do not have the vote -- the prince, who holds no official position but who along with his father, Prince Talal, has a liberal reputation, said: "We are advocating women's rights as envisioned in Islam. We are seeing very strong indications these days where women are taking their positions in society and performing their duties."

The issue of women not being allowed to vote is clearly a live one. The election rules are written ambiguously and it was not until Interior Minister Prince Nayef declared in November that women would not vote that speculation about their participation was squashed. Even then, Assistant Local Government Minister Prince Mansour said his ministry had yet to rule on whether women could be "appointed" to municipal councils. Prince Mansour's elections Web site has a link to the results of the recent chambers of commerce elections held across the kingdom, in which women were allowed to vote for the first time. No women candidates ran in the chamber of commerce elections, but the director of the women's section, a princess, said a substantial number turned out to vote. In the past, men have voted on behalf of women members of the chambers.

Saudi women have also been pressuring to be allowed to drive. In November, the Arab News reported that "a broad-based coalition of Saudi women has renewed the call for removing the ban on driving . . . women are hopeful that the reform process initiated by the Saudi government in different sectors also will cover the subject of driving."

### Regions Might Behave Differently

Registration has already begun for the second batch of voting, to be held March 3 in the eastern and southwestern regions. The final voting for the remainder of the councils across the country -- 178 in total -- will be on April 21, when voters including those in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, until then busy with the Hajj (pilgrimage), will go to the polls.

Although candidates stand as individuals -- no political parties are allowed -- it may be possible to make some political judgments, especially based on the numbers registering. Whereas Riyadh province forms part of the central Nejd region of Arabia, long dominated by the House of Saud, the Eastern Province, along the Persian Gulf coast, has a local majority of Shia Muslims, historically considered an underclass in predominantly Sunni Wahhabi society. Another area to watch is the Hejaz, along the Red Sea coast, which includes Mecca and Medina. Inhabitants of this

area were conquered in the 1920s by Abdul Aziz, the father of the current, ailing King Fahd and the other most senior princes.

Whatever happens, the Saudi royal family is anxious to depict the whole process as being wholly compatible with Islam, mindful perhaps of Osama bin Laden's most recent message. Released December 16 to an Islamic Web site, the statement by the al-Qaeda leader criticized the elections, noting "it is haram (forbidden) to participate in legislative bodies . . . because Allah is the only lawgiver."

Simon Henderson is a London-based associate of The Washington Institute and author of the 2003 Institute Policy Paper *The New Pillar: Conservative Arab Gulf States and U.S. Strategy*. ❖

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