

Elections in Saudi Arabia:

Assessing the Latest Postponement

by [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Sep 24, 2004

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.



Brief Analysis

Municipal elections in Saudi Arabia, scheduled to begin in November, have been postponed until 2005. Given that these will be the first public political elections ever to take place in the kingdom, their introduction has been keenly watched, both domestically and from abroad. The latest delay, the second since the original announcement in 2003, indicates that the Saudi royal family is divided over the present usefulness of the sort of broadened political participation that the United States considers vital to combating the militant Islamism of al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. No official reason was given for the change, which was reported on September 12 as being a rescheduling rather than a postponement.

The news was certainly surprising; after all, a month-long public awareness campaign had been announced just the previous day. The security situation did not appear to be the culprit behind the delay. Two small bombs exploded in Jedda on September 11, but the kingdom as a whole has settled down since the separate murders of three American expatriates in June by al-Qaeda terrorists. Although shootings of foreigners have continued (an Irishman was gunned down on August 3, and a British expatriate was killed on September 16), Crown Prince Abdullah, the de facto ruler, stated in August, "We have passed the stage of terrorism." Similarly, on September 13, Defense Minister Prince Sultan described the security situation in the kingdom as "excellent."

Background

When the proposed elections were first announced in October 2003, the official Saudi Press Agency stated that the government had decided to "widen the participation of citizens in running local affairs through elections." Half the members of the 178 municipal councils would be elected under the reform (the other half would be appointed by the government, as in the past). These elections were to be held "within a year." It was not until August 2004 that an election timetable was announced: voting was to take place in the province surrounding Riyadh in November; five more provinces would vote in late January 2005; and the remaining seven provinces would hold elections in late February. The need to avoid clashing with the fasting month of Ramadan (October 2004) and the Hajj pilgrimage season in January 2005 (which particularly affects the provinces containing the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and the port city of Jedda) was cited to explain the staggered timetable.

According to the electoral regulations published in August, all male citizens have the right to vote as long as they are twenty-one years old, not in the military, and have lived in their particular precinct for twelve months. As published, the regulations were ambiguous about women's electoral rights, but official statements have since made it clear that women will not be able to stand for election or vote. Saudi newspaper commentary on this issue has ranged from the conservative (e.g., that it is "logical and Islamic" for women to "concentrate on other activities") to the more liberal (e.g., that Saudi women have "the qualifications that enable them to assume their responsibilities," and that they should therefore be allowed to take part). By contrast, men in Saudi prisons will not only be able to vote, but will also be able to stand as candidates, according to the director-general of prisons.

Prior to the latest postponement, Saudi authorities had made much of the role of UN electoral experts, with the Saudi Press Agency reporting that "Saudi officials have agreed with UN experts" on the proposed timetable. In fact, the UN appeared embarrassed by these reports, emphasizing that, although a team from the Electoral Assistance Division had been sent from New York at the invitation of the Saudi authorities, its purpose was merely to make an assessment. Whether the UN will actually assist in the Saudi elections is a political decision for the UN authorities to make; the absence of voting rights for women will likely prove to be an insurmountable obstacle.

Future Plans and Domestic Implications

The new electoral schedule, as announced on September 12, is as follows: the Riyadh region will now vote on February 10; the eastern and southwestern regions will vote on March 3; and the remaining regions, including the provinces of Mecca and Medina, will vote on April 21. An early test of this schedule will be whether voter registration begins as planned on November 23.

Meanwhile, other plans for political participation appear to have collapsed. Soon after the October 2003 announcement, Prince Sultan told a political campaigner that, within three years, a third of the 120 seats in the consultative council, the body that advises the government, would be filled by election. In April 2004, however, the prince claimed that the kingdom was not yet ready for such elections because voters might pick "illiterate and unqualified candidates."

Domestically, the electoral delays, as well as the obstacles to participation by women, will frustrate the more liberal, middle-class Saudis who have long desired a political role in the kingdom. Moreover, members of the royal family seem increasingly at odds with each other regarding the introduction of an open political system and how to handle demands for change. Crown Prince Abdullah is thought to be sympathetic to some change and has met with activists. In March 2004, however, Interior Minister Prince Nayef ordered the arrest of thirteen reformist intellectuals who had called for parliamentary elections and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. In August, three of these individuals were put on trial after refusing to sign letters promising good behavior; they were charged with sowing dissent and creating political instability. The judge abandoned the initial hearing when 400 supporters demanded access to the courtroom and shouted slogans outside.

Implications for U.S. Policy

Although Saudi Arabia remains a key U.S. ally, the postponement of elections may have embarrassed the White House. After Riyadh's initial announcement of elections in October 2003, President George W. Bush declared in a major speech (to the National Endowment for Democracy on November 6) that "the Saudi government is taking first steps toward reform, including a plan for gradual introduction of elections. By giving the Saudi people a greater role in their own society, the Saudi government can demonstrate true leadership in the region."

In general Washington's reluctance to criticize Riyadh publicly has declined since the attacks of September 11, 2001. For example, on September 15, 2004, the State Department added the kingdom to a list of countries where religious freedom is violated, raising the possibility of sanctions. Riyadh needs to be reminded that the United States sees

broader political participation as a key component in undermining the root causes of Islamic terrorism, and that it considers local elections as a critical step in this process.

Simon Henderson is a London-based associate of The Washington Institute and author of the Institute Policy Paper [The New Pillar: Conservative Arab Gulf States and U.S. Strategy \(templateC04.php?CID=33\)](#) (2003).

Policy #903

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven](#)

Feb 14, 2022

♦
Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

[\(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

♦
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Gulf & Energy Policy (/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-states)