



Saudi suffragettes: The first steps on a long journey

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<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34947039> (video)

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34941689> (video)

Saudi suffragettes



In 2011, amidst the rapidly spreading Arab Spring protests, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah granted women the right to vote and run in 2015 local elections and to be appointed to his advisory Shura Council.

This was part of King Abdullah's gradual opening of Saudi Arabia to various rights for women, which included opening a fully integrated co-ed King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, in the town of Thuwal. The king also appointed the first female deputy minister — of women's education.

By 2013, King Abdullah also ordered that at least 20% of seats in the Consultative Council, the country's top advisory, be set aside for women. The council advises the king and can propose laws. He then appointed 30 women to the council, according to the U.S. State Department.

The number of women in the Saudi workforce also has been increasing, from 23,000 in 2004 to more than 400,000 in 2015, according to the government.

But some advocacy groups, including Amnesty International, contend that the king shouldn't have stopped there and should have granted women other rights, such as the ability to drive. No law in Saudi Arabia says women can't drive, but people must obtain local driver's licenses and they are simply never issued to women. A woman's male "guardian," usually a father, husband, brother or son, can stop her traveling overseas, marrying, working, studying or having some forms of elective surgery.

But it is the ability to vote that has many women excited about the possibilities in this stanchly conservative Middle Eastern kingdom.

"We're making history," says Haifa al-Hababi, the first woman to sign up to stand for local office. The thought of it makes her smile, and wipe away a tear.

In the end, 978 women candidates and 130,637 women voters registered to participate in the election, according to Saudi election officials. A total of 5,938 men are running for the local offices, and more than 1.35 million men have registered to vote, according to the Saudi government.

But these aren't national elections as the country doesn't have those. It is officially an absolute monarchy. And Saudi Arabia does not even hold regular elections.

Elections of any kind are rare in the Saudi kingdom – the 2015 elections were only the third time in history that Saudis had gone to the polls.

There were no elections in the 40 years between 1965 and 2005.

These municipal elections that women are now able to vote in and run for office are for municipal councils. Municipal councils prepare a municipality's budget, set taxes and supervise local financial transactions, among other responsibilities. However, they have no lawmaking or national powers.

Voters will fill half of the roughly 2,100 municipal seats. The King selects the other half, according to the U.S. State Department.

"Saudi Arabia is a new and small country, only 85 years old," she says when I point out that women got the right to vote long ago in most countries. "We are the generation who will bring change."

"It's a first step," says Sheikha Al-Sudairy, chief projects officer at the al-Nahda Centre. "We can't say that just because it's not perfect, it's meaningless."

"This is a symbolic victory for women as these roles don't come with much power," said Joana Cook, a Middle East political analyst in London. "But absolutely it's a stepping stone."

At al-Nahda, where women are in charge from the board of directors to the cleaning staff, they've been educating women and men in the principles and practice of voting in a country with almost no experience of either. In Saudi Arabia's absolute monarchy, all major changes, including these new rights for women, come down through royal decree.

"We're talking about local councils and what it means to make a difference with garbage, water and sewage, so we're trying to convince people that exercising their civic responsibility will make a difference."

But not all women are as excited about this new right.

Women make up only a small percentage of over a total of 1.4 million registered voters in a country of nearly 30 million people.

In Riyadh, the capital city regarded as more traditional than other main centers like Jeddah, I met many young women cautious about the change.

"I think it's a great step but I'd rather wait and see the results," says 27-year-old Sultana Ahmed, who works as a consultant on corporate governance.

When I ask what holds her back, she replies: "Maybe fear of disappointment. I want to see if the women can actually deliver."

"People are afraid of change," says writer and human rights activist Bareea al-Zubeedy. "They think that behind every change, something bad will happen."

Bareea was part of the "Women to Drive" movement, one of the rare public expressions of women's protest in a conservative kingdom.

Bareea dismisses the idea of women's voting rights. "They're trying to make us think about small issues as if they are big ones," she says. "It's just a trick."

Women voting and standing in elections will give them more public visibility, even though campaigning must contend with strict rules which segregate men and women in public places.

A guardianship system which obliges women to seek the consent of men for everything from work to education to travel adds further complications.



Gender barriers prevented many women from participating fully in the political process. Many women voters had to rely on men to drive them to the polling places because there is a ban on female driving. Many couldn't participate without their husband or father's permission. Female candidates were prohibited from campaigning to men and could only speak to them through a male spokesman.

In the 2015 elections, which included 978 female candidates, several women were elected on a municipal council for the first time in Saudi Arabia.

"As a first step it is a great achievement. Now we feel we are part of society, that we contribute," said Sara Ahmed, 30, a physiotherapist entering a polling station in north Riyadh. "We talk a lot about it, it's a historic day for us."

Saudi women won 20 total seats in the election, 1% of the roughly 2,100 municipal seats.

The female winners include, among others,

- Salma al-Otaibi in the Mecca region
- Lama al-Sulaiman, Rasha Hafza, Sana al-Hamam and Massoumeh al-Reda in Jeddah
- Huda al-Jeraisy in Riyadh
- Hanouf al-Hazimi in al-Jawf province
- Aisha Ali Bakri in Jazan province
- Sanaa al-Hammam and Masoumah Abdelreda in the Ahsa region
- Khadra al-Mubarak in Qatif district
- Mina al-Omairi and Fadhila al-Attawi in the Northern Borders province

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Polls open in Saudi Arabia, first time women allowed to vote

By Michael Pearson, CNN
Updated 5:23 AM ET, Sat December 12, 2015



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<http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/12/world/saudia-arabia-women-vote/index.html> (video)

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Women in Saudi Arabia have cast their first votes in the country's history, in municipal elections.

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35075702> (video)



A woman casts her ballot in Jeddah. Some 130,000 women were registered to vote - a number far below the 1.35m registered male voters.

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Saudi Arabian women vote, run in local elections for first time



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7 question quiz: How much do you know about women's right in Saudi Arabia:
<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34985939>