



Saudi Women Behind the Wheel: Prince Mohammed's Litmus Test

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Saudi Arabia's long-awaited lifting of a ban on women's driving, widely viewed as a symbol of Saudi misogyny, will likely serve as a litmus test for Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's ability to introduce economic and social reforms despite conservative opposition. It also distracts attention from international criticism of the kingdom's war in Yemen and charges by human rights groups, as well as some Muslim leaders, that the kingdom fosters sectarianism and prejudice against non-Muslims.

If last week's national day celebrations, during which women were for the first time allowed to enter a stadium, is anything to go by, opposition to the lifting of Saudi Arabia's ban on women's driving is likely to be limited to protests on social media.

To be sure, thousands welcomed both moves. Moreover, [Saudi media](#) reported that senior Islamic scholars who have opposed expanding women's rights for decades, some of whom have criticized Prince Mohammed's effort to expand entertainment opportunities in the kingdom, said they saw no religious objection to women's driving.

Conservatives couched their rejection of enhancing women's rights as a response to the national day celebrations. "Patriotism does not mean sin," said one critic on Twitter. "Of course, what is happening does not please God and his prophet. Patriotism is not dancing, free mixing, losing decency and playing music. What strange times."

A [video](#) of a man telling celebrating crowds that they have "no shame, no religion, no tribe" was widely shared on social media.

Hundreds of thousands used an Arabic hashtag demanding the restoration of powers to the kingdom's religious police, whose ability to strictly enforce ultra-conservative Sunni Muslim moral codes was curbed last year.

A 24-year-old, speaking earlier this year to *The Guardian*, noted that ultra-conservatism maintains a hold on significant numbers of young people. "You know that the top 11 Twitter handles here are Salafi clerics, right? We are talking more than 20 million people who hang on their every word. They will not accept this sort of change. Never," the youth said.

Talal Salama, a Saudi singer, was [attacked on social media this week for singing a text from the Koran](#) during the national day celebrations. "The disaster is not just that he is sitting singing the Koran, the disaster is that it was a party approved by the government that is allowing him to sing," said lawyer [Musleh al-'Udayni](#) on Twitter.

In advance of the lifting of the driving ban, Saudi authorities forbade Saad al-Hijri, head of fatwas (religious legal opinions) in the Asir governorate, from preaching on the grounds that he has declared that [women should not drive because their brains shrink](#) to a quarter the size of a man's when they go shopping.

The suspension of al-Hijri was the latest measure in a crackdown in which scores of Islamic scholars, including some of the most popular in the kingdom, were arrested, as were judges and intellectuals. The arrests were intended to ensure that conservative opposition to the lifting of the driving ban would be muted.

The kingdom's decision to delay implementation of the decision until June of next year gives the government time to neutralize opposition and serves as an indication of what it will take to ensure Saudi women's rights.

To implement the decision, Saudi Arabia will first have to eliminate [bureaucratic, legal, and social hurdles](#) that prevent women from obtaining licenses, create facilities where women can learn to drive, and train policemen to interact with female drivers in a country that enforces gender segregation and in which men largely interact only with female relatives.

The lifting of the ban is part of Prince Mohammed's [Vision 2030](#) plan, which seeks to diversify and streamline the economy and introduce limited social reform while avoiding political liberalization.

The prince's vision for Saudi women's rights is by no means unrestrained. Women account for half the Saudi population and more than half its university graduates, but Vision 2030 envisions that women will account for only 30% of the reformed kingdom's workforce.

While the lifting of the ban in a decree by King Salman allows women to apply for a license without the permission of their male guardian, the [principle of male guardianship](#) that subjects women to the will of their menfolk remains in place.

There is, moreover, no indication that last week's use of a stadium as a test case will lead to a lifting of restrictions on women's sporting rights. Those restrictions bar women's free access to men's competitions and limit their ability to practice and compete in a majority of sports disciplines not mentioned in the Koran.

The public relations value of the lifting of the ban was evident in the fact that it temporarily drew attention away from news that reflected badly on the kingdom, including mounting international criticism of Saudi conduct of its war in Yemen, which has pushed that country to the edge of the abyss. Saudi Arabia has been desperately seeking to [avert a critical UN resolution](#) and defeat calls for an independent investigation.

It also pushed to the backburner a 62-page [report by Human Rights Watch](#), published Tuesday, that documents that despite the banning of Mr. Al-Hijri, Saudi Arabia has "permitted government-appointed religious scholars and clerics to refer to religious minorities in derogatory terms or demonize them in official documents and religious rulings that influence government decision-making." Anti-Shia, anti-Sufi, anti-Christian, and anti-Jewish sentiment is evident in the Saudi education system and judiciary, the report said.

Saudi Arabia adheres to a puritan interpretation of Islam that views Shiite Muslims as heretics and advocates avoidance by Muslims of non-Muslims. The kingdom has spent an estimated \$100 billion in the last four decades to propagate its austere vision of Islam in a bid to establish itself as the leader of the Muslim world, and also to counter the revolutionary appeal of Iran following the 1979 Islamic revolution that toppled a monarch and icon of US influence in the Middle East.

In doing so, Saudi Arabia has contributed to Muslim societies like Malaysia and Indonesia becoming more conservative and intolerant towards minorities. Saudi ultra-conservative influence was visible earlier this month when an owner of a self-service launderette in the Malaysian state of Johor [banned non-Muslims from using his services](#).

"Saudi Arabia has relentlessly promoted a reform narrative in recent years, yet it allows government-affiliated clerics and textbooks to openly demonize religious minorities such as Shia. This hate speech prolongs the systematic discrimination against the Shia minority and – at its worst – is employed by violent groups who attack them," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch.

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