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Saudi Women Participate in the Kingdom's Municipal Elections: A Sign of Change in State-Society Relations

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On December 12, 2015, Saudi Arabia held municipal elections for only the third time in its history. Voters elected 2,106 members to 284 municipal councils, consisting of two-thirds of the total number of council seats. The remaining one-third will be appointed by King Salman bin ʿAbd al-ʿAziz. In contrast to the 2005 and 2011 municipal elections, women participated in these elections as both voters and candidates: among the 1.5 million registered voters, 120,000 women cast votes (c. 8% of the total registered–while the total population is approximately 28 million, of which 21 million are Saudi citizens). In addition, roughly 1,000 women stood as candidates in the elections. Approximately twenty of them were elected to municipal councils, including in major cities like Riyadh, Mecca, Jiddah, al-Ahsa, al-Qatif, and al-Jouf. Additional women are expected to be added to the municipal councils when the king's appointments of the remaining seats are announced in early 2016.

Following the announcement that Salma bin Hizab Al-ʿUtaybi was the first female to be elected to a council seat (in Mecca), the Saudi media focused its coverage on female participation in the elections. Media analysts claimed that women's participation in the elections was a "revolution," or even a "feminist revolution," that was achieved as a result of women's Internet campaigns using social media, whose purpose was to pave the way for the full integration of women into Saudi society. Yet there were also many who argued that the 2015 elections did not constitute a turning point and that most Saudi women remain far from realizing their full rights. They point out that female voter turnout was low, due to the fact female candidates were only allowed to campaign in front of audiences of women. In those instances where there were predominantly male audiences, female candidates were required to use a male member of their family to present

their agendas. Overall, the issue of female participation reflects changes taking place in state-society relations in the Saudi kingdom.

In the 1960s, during the reign of King Faisal bin ʿAbd al-ʿAziz, there was an unwritten social contract that came to be known as "Faisal's Order." The government provided the kingdom's citizens with education, healthcare, employment, and social services in exchange for political acquiescence to the ruling Saʿud family. With the exception of the traditional practice of tribal consultative councils, Saudis ceded their political participation, political representation, and most of their freedom of expression in exchange for socio-economic security. In the framework of "Faisal's Order," the state also provided for the needs of the ʿ*ulama* (religious scholars), granting them huge budgets, showering them with respect, and providing them with the means to spread Wahhabism (Saudi Arabia's revivalist and puritanical stream of Sunni Islam) throughout the world. In return, Saudi religious elites did not interfere in the affairs of state and made themselves available to the ruling family when it needed a religious blessing to advance its policy decisions. King Faisal's educational reforms for women were among the most important examples of this dynamic. Faisal made it possible for every Saudi girl to receive primary, secondary, and higher education, including in professions that had been clearly identified with men, such as those associated with the sciences, economics, and technology. If not for these reforms, it is hard to imagine Saudi women participating as voters or candidates in the latest elections.

"Faisal's Order" began to unravel in the middle of the 1980s. The kingdom's coffers ran low due to the decline in the price of oil, massive military spending as a result of Saudi involvement in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1989) and the Gulf War (1990-1991), widespread corruption among the ruling elites, and low productivity in the Saudi economy. For both royal elites and ordinary citizens, it was already clear that the state would not be able to continue to provide for the needs of society as a whole. Thus, in the 1990s, the kingdom introduced privatization and taxation, which undermined the legitimacy of the government's demand that the Saudi people remain politically quiescent. Therefore, during the 1990s, as a result of public pressure and growing demands for political reform and an expansion of freedom of expression, the ruling elite began to offer a program of reform in order to send a message that the public's demands were legitimate. However, the government reserved the right to choose which reforms to advance and at what rate to implement them. "Stability" (*istiqrar*) became the government's buzzword, used whenever it needed to justify or rationalize its slow rate of socio-economic reform.

The government's tight control over the implementation of socio-political reform is closely related to how women's participation in the 2015 municipal elections unfolded. In 1993, King Fahd established an advisory body, the Shura Council (*majlis al-shura;* "Consultative Council"), consisting of 60 handpicked members chosen by the king, who in practice lacked any real authority. In 1997, a royal decree increased the size of the council to 90 members. By 2005, the number of council members had grown to 150. The council was then given the authority to invite government ministers to council meetings and review policy decisions and their implementation. In 2013, 30 women were added to the council by King ʿAbdullah. Concurrently, he stipulated that women would be given the right to vote and run as candidates in the 2015 municipal elections — and King Salman carried out the decision when he became the Saudi monarch earlier in the year.

Despite the establishment of the Shura Council and the inclusion of women as members, and the 2015 municipal council elections with female participation as voters and candidates, Saudi Arabia is not undergoing a process of democratization. The government officially refers to these changes as "the expansion of political participation" (*tusiʿa al-musharka al-siyasiya*). This formula is accepted by most of the Saudi public, including women, because they share the opinion that stability trumps everything, and it will not be preserved if the rate of reform is too fast and the reform program too sweeping. The Saudi monarchy uses the "Arab Spring" uprisings in Syria, Libya, and Yemen as examples of political change that results in chaos, destruction, a collapsing economy, and the large scale death of civilians.

Women's rights in Saudi Arabia is an example of the way the ruling elites in Saudi Arabia promote piecemeal reform, advancing step-by-step, in order to preserve not only stability, but the delicate balance between the various interest groups in Saudi society. For example, in 2005, when the issue of women's participation in the municipal elections was being considered, the kingdom was suffering from a spate of *al-Qaʿida* terrorist attacks, and the government, which desperately needed the support of the religious elites to confront Islamic terrorism, preferred to side with the ʿulama's position and deny women the right to participate in the elections, believing that to do otherwise would subvert the stability of the kingdom. In 2011, when the "Arab Spring" erupted, the government feared that its "shockwaves" would reach the kingdom. The ruling family prioritized coopting important sectors of Saudi society, including the security services, students, and young couples. As a precaution, the decision to allow women to participate in municipal elections, which was accepted in principle, was again deferred or postponed in the name of stability. In 2014, when an online campaign to grant women the right to drive was organized through social media, the government again sided with the religious elites and

punished women who participated in the campaign. Women who drove their cars, despite the explicit prohibition against it, were jailed.

Therefore, when the government allowed women to participate in the 2015 elections without the ʿulama's approval, it mobilized all of its media power to promote the decision. Newspapers, television channels, government internet sites, and Twitter accounts of government offices all presented women's participation in these elections as an essential step in the kingdom's development, and called on women to vote and present themselves as candidates.

Socio-political development in Saudi Arabia is not just the unilateral expression of the government's will, but also the result of the kingdom's long-term socio-economic processes. Since the days of "Faisal's Order," Saudi women have slowly accumulated social and economic power. They constitute more than 50 percent of the kingdom's academics. They participate in the workforce, and the Internet allows many women to work from home, earning their livelihoods and contributing to their families' income. Today there are even a number of Saudi families where the mother is the family's primary earner, the father is unemployed, and the family lives off the mother's private business that is managed from home.

Women's partcipation in the Saudi municipal elections is not window-dressing, but it is also not a "feminist revolution." It is part and parcel of the pattern of state-society relations in the Saudi kingdom since "Faisal's Order" began to erode in the 1980s. The 2015 municipal elections are another sign that Saudi Arabia is not experiencing a social revolution, but advancing at a slow and controlled pace along its path of political, social, and economic reform. The ruling elites are navigating these processes with great caution in order to preserve stability and insure that a step forward for one sector is not interpreted as infringing on the interests of any other sector. Only time will reveal the extent to which the kingdom will remain on this path.

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