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Saudi women finally get right to vote, so why aren't more registering?

By Taylor Luck

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For the first time in its history, Saudi Arabia is allowing women to vote and run for office, a dramatic step forward in the male-dominated conservative society.

But few Saudi women have registered to vote in the upcoming municipal polls. Women and human rights activists point to persistent disadvantages – such as a frequent lack of personal documents and the ban on women driving – that block women from autonomous civic participation. And many don't know where they need to go to get on the voting rolls.

In preparation for municipal elections on Dec. 12, Saudi authorities had agreed to allow women to both vote and run for seats on the local councils, and they opened the voter registry last week. Voters are to select 2,100 members for a total of 284 councils.

The authorities even reserved one-third of the kingdom's 1,263 voter registration centers specifically for women, and King Salman is publicly supporting women voting, an initiative of his predecessor, the late King Abdullah ibn Abdulaziz. In state-run media Salman called women “a crucial partner in the country's ongoing development.”



Although the councils are largely concerned with local municipal affairs and one-third of their membership is appointed, the step is more than symbolic. With the consultative shura council, Saudi Arabia's rubber-stamp parliament, being hand-picked by the Saudi monarch, the municipal councils stand as the highest elected office in the land.

While Abdullah appointed 30 women to serve on the shura council, and women have held positions in the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce, no Saudi woman has ever held elected office.

Despite government support and nationwide training workshops, however, only 70 women are expected to run for office, according to local media reports.

Women have fared little better on the voter registration side. A two-week voting registry period closed on Thursday, and unofficial estimates in local media put women's participation at less than 5 percent. According to Al Jazeera, there are entire districts in the liberal city of Jeddah that registered only a single female voter. On the first day of registration in the city of Medina on Aug. 18, a total of five women registered, local media reported.

Logistical challenges

Leading Saudi women pointed to a lack of public awareness as one reason. Public-funded advertisements and awareness campaigns began earlier this month, a few weeks before registration opened. And voter registration centers are being held in girls' schools that are often far from voters' home districts, creating confusion.

“Many of these places are unknown and the addresses are confusing – people do not know what district they are in, let alone the school,” says Bassma Al Seyofi, co-founder of Baladi Initiative, a grassroots women’s political empowerment movement formed in the wake of 2011 municipal elections, which excluded women.

“There is a lack of awareness, and this has been a major obstacle,” Ms. Al Seyofi said.

Another obstacle is voters’ IDs. Under the laws governing the elections, each voter must bring their own national ID to register. Many women in Saudi use an over-arching family ID, having never needed a personal civic identity card in the past.

Driving ban creates a male veto

Yet perhaps the greatest barrier to “getting out” the Saudi women vote lies in simple transportation.

Human Rights Watch, which welcomed the election reform as “a start” and an “important message” to Saudi society, noted that limitations on women’s movement in the kingdom made the step largely “symbolic.” Saudi women are barred from driving and require a male guardian escort in public.

“The only women who can vote are women whose male guardians want them to participate and are willing to drive them to the polls,” says Adam Coogle, a Human Rights Watch researcher for Saudi Arabia

“It is a structural problem that exists in all spheres,” Mr. Coogle said.

The ban on Saudi women drivers, upheld by a conservative religious establishment, has scuttled previous campaigns by the government and the royal family to encourage women to enter the workforce and take a more active role in public life.

The ban even impacted potential women voters in the capital, Riyadh, where traffic congestion and hours of evening gridlock dissuaded some from taking their wives to register.

“The electoral center is far, and I have to register first for a national ID,” said Um Hashem, who declined to use her full name.

“There just isn’t time or transportation,” she said, noting that many of her friends were also forgoing the municipal elections.

A positive step, if small

Then there's the status of the local councils themselves, which are granted few powers and answer directly to the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs. Women say it is hard to get excited about a position with so little prestige.

“Some nationals, including women, do not believe the municipal elections will add anything to their lives,” Al Seyofi says.

Yet as Saudi female candidates prepare to register for the first time next week, women say that no matter the turnout, they have notched an important victory.

“It is a very positive step – even if it’s a small one. Even if one Saudi woman makes it on a council, it is a victory,” Al Seyofi says.