

SAUDI ARABIA: Saudi Arabia agrees to let women drive

By Ben Hubbard

The New York Times (26.09.2017) – <http://nyti.ms/2ys0J0Q> – Saudi Arabia announced on Tuesday that it would allow women to drive, ending a longstanding policy that has become a global symbol of the oppression of women in the ultraconservative kingdom.

The change, which will take effect in June 2018, was announced in a royal decree read live on state television and in a simultaneous media event in Washington. The decision highlights the damage that the ban on women driving has done to the kingdom's international reputation and its hopes for a public relations benefit from the reform.

Saudi leaders also hope the new policy will help the economy by increasing women's participation in the workplace. Many working Saudi women spend much of their salaries on drivers or must be driven to work by male relatives.

"It is amazing," said Fawziah al-Bakr, a Saudi university professor who was among 47 women who participated in the kingdom's first protest against the ban – in 1990. After driving around the Saudi capital, Riyadh, the women were arrested and some lost their jobs.

"Since that day, Saudi women have been asking for the right to drive, and finally it arrived," she said by phone. "We have been waiting for a very long time.

Saudi Arabia, home to Islam's holiest sites, is an absolute monarchy ruled according to Shariah law. Saudi officials and clerics have provided numerous explanations for the ban over the years.

Some said that it was inappropriate in Saudi culture for women to drive, or that male drivers would not know how to handle having women in cars next to them. Others argued that allowing women to drive would lead to promiscuity and the collapse of the Saudi family. One cleric claimed – with no evidence – that driving harmed women’s ovaries.

Rights groups and Saudi activists have long campaigned for the ban to be overturned, and some women have been arrested and jailed for defying the prohibition and taking the wheel.

In 2014, Loujain Hathloul was arrested after trying to cross the border from the United Arab Emirates into Saudi Arabia and detained for 73 days.

“@LoujainHathloul I’m so proud of you,” Fahad Albuteiri, her husband and a well-known Saudi comedian, wrote on Twitter.

Ms. Hathloul tweeted a simple reaction to the news: “Thank god.”

The ban has long marred the image of Saudi Arabia, even among its closest allies, like the United States, whose officials sometimes chafed at a policy shared only by the jihadists of the Islamic State and the Taliban.

The decision won near universal praise in Washington. Heather Nauert, the State Department’s spokeswoman, called it “a great step in the right direction for that country.”

The momentum to change the policy picked up in recent years with the rise of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the king’s 32-year-old son, who has laid out a far-reaching plan to overhaul the kingdom’s economy and society.

Increasing numbers of women are working in a growing number of professions, and in 2015, women were allowed to vote and to run for seats on the kingdom’s local councils.

Ending the ban on women driving is expected to face some

resistance inside the kingdom, where families are highly patriarchal and some men say they worry about their female relatives getting stranded should their cars break down.

But in a small news conference at the Saudi embassy in Washington, an exuberant Prince Khalid bin Salman, the Saudi ambassador, said women would be able to obtain driver's licenses without having to ask permission of their husbands, fathers or any male guardian – despite so-called “guardianship” laws that give men power over their female relatives.

Under these laws, women cannot travel abroad, work or undergo some medical procedures without the consent of their male “guardian,” often a father, a husband or even a son. While the enforcement of guardianship laws has loosened in recent years, there is little to stop Saudi men from greatly limiting the movements of their wives or daughters.

The ambassador, who is a son of the king, said that women would be able to drive alone but that the Interior Ministry would decide whether they could work as professional drivers.

He said he did not expect the change in policy to face significant resistance.

“I think our society is ready,” he said.

That remains an open question. Many Saudis remain deeply conservative, and social strictures like the driving ban have been reinforced over the years by the kingdom's top clerics, many of them on the government payroll.

But there was little public dissent on Tuesday, likely because the Saudi government often exerts pressure on prominent voices to make sure they either back the government line or keep quiet. In recent weeks it has arrested more than two dozens clerics, academics and others, accusing them of being foreign-funded dissidents.

After the change on the driving ban was announced, an anonymous text circulated through What's App in the kingdom calling on the "virtuous ones" to work against its implementation, to protect against epidemics, adultery and other disasters.

At the news conference, the ambassador insisted that the decision would not be reversed or seriously opposed.

Beyond the effects it could have on Saudi Arabia's image abroad, letting women drive could help the Saudi economy.

Low oil prices have limited the government jobs that many Saudis have long relied on, and the kingdom is trying to push more citizens, including women, into private sector employment. But some working Saudi women say hiring private drivers to get them to and from work eats up much of their pay, diminishing the incentive to work.

In recent years, many women have come to rely on ride-sharing apps like Uber and Careem to gain some freedom of movement.

Many of the kingdom's professionals and young people will welcome the change, viewing it as a step to making life in the country a bit more like life elsewhere.

Manal al-Sharif, a Saudi women's rights advocate who filmed herself driving in 2011 and posted the footage to YouTube to protest the law, celebrated the announcement on Tuesday.

Ms. Sharif was instrumental in organizing groups of women for collective protests to demand an end to the ban on female drivers. She was arrested at the time for taking part in the actions, and later wrote a book about her experience. She now lives in Australia.

But despite celebrating the success for female drivers, she said the next campaign would be to end guardianship laws.

The royal decree, read by an announcer of state television and

signed by King Salman, said traffic laws would be amended, including to allow the government to issue driver's licenses "to men and women alike."

The decree said a high-level ministerial committee was being formed to study other issues that needed to be addressed for the change to take place. For example, the police will have to be trained to interact with women in a way that they rarely do in Saudi Arabia, a society where men and women who are not related have little contact.

The committee has 30 days to provide its recommendations, the decree said, so that the new policy can be carried out starting on June 24, 2018.

The decree said that the majority of the Council of Senior Scholars – the kingdom's top clerical body, whose members are appointed by the king – had agreed that the government could allow women to drive if done in accordance with Shariah law.

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