

Saudi men resist women driving.
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Ordinarily, the status of women around the world is of more interest to western educated women than to most men. However, decent men find the nasty treatment of women around much of the world abhorrent, including today the remnants of abuse in our own society. Yes, we do have some men who abuse their power over women who work for them, demanding sex; but today, when this behavior is made public, there is a price to pay. We tend to forget that these values are relatively new in the world, and even new in modern civilization.

It is no surprise that Saudi Arabia, a kingdom ruled by an absolute monarch whose power is shared with a fundamentalist sect of Islam, is no paradise for its women subjects. Women in that country have the status of children, under the total control of their menfolk, in addition to their ruling masters. Until recently, a woman out in public not properly covered head to toe could expect a public beating by the "religious police." A woman accused of sexual infidelity by her husband could expect a public execution in the market square.

But Saudi Arabia is slowly changing, and with a new king and his young heir-apparent, it is rapidly changing: a dangerous thing in a reactionary society. For this reason, treatment of women in Saudi Arabia is important for us to follow. Rapid change can face potentially violent pushback.

The difference between Saudi Arabia and all the other Muslim-majority countries around the world is that all Saudi women, not just the poor women living in villages, are in the thrall of reactionary customs. Saudi women, until recently, were barred from driving cars. In other countries, women can drive---if they are wealthy enough and urban enough to have a car. This fact has been an embarrassment to Saudi Arabia's modern sector, both men and women. The uneducated and pious men, however, like things as they have always been. They are much threatened by the notion that women have rights.

For the past decade, educated elite women have pushed for having the right to drive. Professional working women who are not permitted to drive must depend upon hiring a driver (Pakistani hired labor) to take them to and from work, to take the children to school, and to go shopping. This is both expensive and a nuisance, and has become unacceptable to the increasingly vocal women, especially those who have traveled outside Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia has a new king and crown prince, a western educated and very modern young man who is in a hurry to make his country's culture match its incredible oil wealth. Chafing at the snail's pace of change in his country, he is using his and his father's absolute power to make some sweeping changes. He has locked up (in a luxury hotel) his most obstinate royal relatives, forcing them to surrender some of their corruptly obtained money. He has also taken on the Wahhabi clergy, a power source for 150 years, jailing many and letting them know they are now under harsh oversight. He has also assumed control over the military (both national and Saudi family's own), keeping them busy in a war in Yemen. So far, he is getting away with it.

But control of women is the hot button issue in every society, even in ours until women got the right to vote in 1920. Women may finally drive cars in Saudi Arabia. The king and prince have so ordained. But many Saudi men are less keen on this. Suburban women, even educated ones, have been threatened with death by men if they drive. One woman woke to find her car burned to the ground. This pushback flies in the face of car dealers eager for their new customers and women eager for a breath of freedom. Those of us watching Saudi Arabia's bold modernization are right to fear a counter-revolution from the brutes who controlled women for so long. It could bring down the monarchy.

679 words

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