

Saudi Women under the Context of the Arab Spring

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Abstract

The main goal of this article is to show how Saudi women frame their activism in recent times. Taking into consideration a view on how Saudi women is portrayed as homogenised and single person, this article analyse the moments of making public their demands and how women employ certain tactics to advance their petitions, but also to become visualised and heard. Although there is a small group of women who are taking part in actual demonstrations, the growing identification on gender lines is taking place, above social divisions and geographical distances. In order to understand how this is taking place, it is conceived here that women actions should be seen under an optic of continuity, starting from early nineties and passing through different stages until the present. In fact, the context of the Arab Spring just served as another impulse to re-invigorate their demands. In contrast to past actions, the activism of women focused on two issues which are analysed: the right to vote and the right to drive. Through their actions, women subvert the image of a "Saudi woman" attached to them, invoking its symbols as means to change the homogenised and idealised women. Here we present how women issue is included in the public debate and how through the crisis of legitimacy experienced by the state, under the context of the "Arab Spring" women take advantage of those moments to demand for change. Due the activism of some Saudi women who by their own actions, public exposure, the use of media, organisation of actions to become political candidates or to demand the right to drive, changes are happening. Meanwhile, despite the polemic caused in the society, the government has to balance between the reformist and traditional elements of the society.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Saudi women, women's rights, citizenship

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Arap Baharı Bağlamında Suudi Kadını

Özet

Bu makalenin temel amacı Suudlu kadınların son zamanlardaki aktivizmlerini nasıl dile getirdiklerini göstermektir. Suudlu kadınların homojenize ve tek birey olarak nasıl tasvir edildiği görüşü göz önünde bulundurularak, bu makale zaman dilimlerini ve kadınların hem kendi taleplerini dile getirmek hem de görünür ve duyulur olmak için nasıl belirli taktikleri uyguladıklarını analiz etti. Küçük bir kadın grubunun asıl gösterilere katılmalarına rağmen, artan cinsiyet hatlarının tanımı sosyal ayırım ve coğrafi mesafenin üzerinde gerçekleşmektedir. Bunun nasıl gerçekleştiğini anlamak için, kadınların eylemlerine doksanların başından başlayıp günümüze kadar geçen farklı evrelerde süreklilik perspektifinden incelenmelidir. Aslında, Arap Baharının bağlamı, kendi taleplerini hareketi geçirmek için ayrı bir motivasyon sağlamıştır. Geçmiş eylemlerin aksine, kadınların aktivizmi incelendiğinde iki konu üzerinde duruldu: Oy hakkı ve araba kullanma hakkı. Kendi eylemleri aracılığıyla, kadınlar onlara yapılan “Suudlu kadın” imajını yıkarak, homojenize ve idealize kadın imajını değiştirmek için bir araç olarak onun sembolleri kullanılıyor. Bu çalışmada, kadın meselelerinin nasıl kamusal tartışmaya dahil edildiğini ve “Arap Baharı” bağlamında devletin yaşadığı meşruiyet krizi ile kadınların o anlardan yararlanarak nasıl değişim için taleplerde bulduklarını takdim ediyoruz. Bazı Suudlu kadınların kendi inisiyatifleri sonucunda gerçekleştirdikleri kamu ifşası, medyayı kullanma, siyasi aday olmak veya araba sürme hakkını talep etmek gibi eylemleri neticesinde bazı değişiklikler gerçekleşiyor. Bu arada, toplumda polemiğe neden olmasına rağmen hükümetin yenilikçiler ve toplumun geleneksel unsurları arasında dengeyi sağlaması gerekmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suudi Arabistan, Suudlu Kadınlar, kadın hakları, vatandaşlık

النساء السعوديات في ظلل الربيع العربي

ملخص

الهدف الرئيسي من هذه المقالة هو استعراض كيفية تُعبير النساء السعوديات عن نشاطهن السياسي والإجتماعي في الآونة الأخيرة. أخذين في الإعتبار وجهة النظر التي تدور حول كيفية تصويرهن على أنهن نمطيات ومنعزلات. حيث تناولت هذه المقالة بالتحليل مراحل تطور ذلك، وكيف اتبع النساء سبل معينة للتعبيل بمطالبهن، و أيضاً كي يصبر لهن حضوراً وصوتاً مسموعاً. فعلى الرغم من أن هناك جماعة صغيرة من النساء التي شاركت في الحراك الفعلي، فإن التعريف المتنامي على أساس الذكورة والأنوثة «الجندر» قد أصبح واقعاً ملموساً، متجاوزاً الإنقسامات الإجتماعية والفضاءات الجغرافية. ومن هذا المنطلق فعلياً ان نعترف بهذا الحراك النسائي علي انه حدثاً مستمراً، بدء مع بداية التسعينيات ومرّ بمراحل مختلفة حتى الوقت الحاضر. في الحقيقة، فإن سياق الربيع العربي قد ساعد تحديداً علي إنعاش مطالب تلك السيدات، كما ان النشاط السياسي والإجتماعي للنساء ارتكز على مسألتين محل للتحليل في هذه الدراسة: الاولي الحق في التصويت، و الثانية الحق في قيادة السيارة، حيث قمن من خلال نشاطاتهن بتحطيم الصورة الذهنية الملتصقة ب «المرأة السعودية»، وذلك من خلال الاستفادة من دلالات هذه الصورة كوسيلة لتغيير النساء النمطيات الباديات في صورة مثالية. نستعرض هنا: كيف تم تضمين قضايا النساء في النقاش العام، وكيف حصلت النساء على مكاسب تلك التطورات للمطالبة بالتغيير من خلال تجربة أزمة الشرعية التي خاضتها الدولة في ظلل «الربيع العربي». حيث أحدث حراك بعض النساء السعوديات من خلال نشاطاتهن، ومكاشفاتهن للرأى العام، واستخدامهن للإعلام، وتوزيع المهام فيما بينهن ما بين ترشح بعضهن في ميدان السياسة ومطالبة البعض الآخر بحق النساء في قيادة السيارة، والذي أحدث تغييرات على أرض الواقع. في غضون ذلك، على الرغم من الجدل العنيف الذي أحدثه هذا الحراك السياسي داخل المجتمع السعودي، فانه جعل الحكومة تضطر للموازنة ما بين عنصرى التيار الإصلاحى والتيار الثوري داخل المجتمع.

كلمات مفتاحية: المملكة العربية السعودية، النساء السعوديات، حقوق المرأة، المواطنة.

Introduction

In the case of Saudi Arabia we saw some demonstrations that were under the context of the Arab Spring, but as in other cases across the Middle East, the demands and the articulation of different dissident groups precedes that context. The Kingdom since the nineties has been subject to a process of “frozen liberalization”, attempting to deter the criticism and demands of diverse groups of the society. However in contrast with other protests in the Arab region, the demands are not calling for the King’s deposition. For instance, the presence of young men in front of the Ministry of Education and Labour demanding jobs since 2010, or the presence of women at the main prisons demanding the release of political prisoners, among other acts, show that more public and mobilized social actors are in Saudi Arabia.

The forty seven women that participated in the public demonstration for the right to drive in 1990 were the notorious ignition that initiated a debate on women’s role. Since then diverse groups of women were formed autonomously with different aims and from different positions towards the role of women and the dynamics of society. For these reasons, a second moment came when women participated in the moment of debate and elaboration of petitions for the King during 2003-2004, the so called, Riyadh spring. These two moments have to be analyzed through the optic of a continuum. Without the defiance of women for the right to drive in 1990, it wouldn’t have been possible to understand the formation of a core group who led the women’s petition and activity in the Riyadh spring. In the same way, the third, during the Arab spring time wouldn’t have been envisioned without the perseverance of women and the effects of the activities of the second moment. If the government has not resolved the demands that appeared since the early years of the millennium, it was not coincidence that with the appearance of movements around the region demanding change, the Saudis, both men and women, took advantage to raise some demands for reform.

This paper aims to elucidate on the nature of renewed women’s activism under the context of Arab Spring. First we have to notice that from the nineties until now the amount of women joining the diverse demands to change their role have increased, and with this

little by little they have managed to be part of the national debates, as well as men activists increasingly acknowledged them in their demands. In contrast to men, women have been able through their gender identification to cross social and regional boundaries that divide Saudi society. During this period women become more assertive claiming their rights. Second, the state is a site of struggle, where the King is balancing in terms of reformist and traditional elements, which are evident in terms of implementation or discussion on new policies. In terms of discursive practices, the state and women keep an ongoing relationship, although asymmetrical, the moments when the legitimacy of the regime is challenged, the so called state signification crisis,¹ women use that moment to advance their demands. When there is coincidence in the frame of the women's demands and official state rhetoric, women have more chances to advance their demands.²

The first part of this article will provide a general view on how women's role is formulated and recreated in Saudi society. Secondly, the discussion on the context previous to the Arab Spring will follow, which will allow an insight into some of the changes and strategies of both the state and society to deal with the rising demands. The third part will analyse women's tactics during the context of the Arab spring in two circumscribed issues: the right to participate in elections and the right to drive, as well as the reactions of other actors. The last part will present some reflections on the features of Saudi women's activism.

The Role of Saudi Woman

In the Kingdom, the role of religion is paramount in the construction of a national identity, and at the same time constitutes the main source of legitimacy for the royal family and the government. In the Saudi state, the practice of a good Muslim is equal to a good citizen in the state and society. Therefore, the daily practices are framed under religious regulations, which are reinforced by the state policies and constitute the parameters to organize and define social life.

1 S. Rajeswari, *The Scandal of the State: Women, Law and Citizenship in Postcolonial India*, (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 25.

2 J. Viterna and K. Fallon, "Democratization, Women's Movements, and Gender-Equitable States: A Framework for Comparison", *American Sociological Review*, Vol.73, 2008, p.671.

The state in order to show its commitment towards Islam integrated the *ulama* as part of the governmental structure.³ Although in practice the religious and political realms are separated, the *ulama* exercise a predominant role in legitimating government policies, and at the same time, the government has used the religious credential of the official *ulama* to counter rest the questioning to its internal and external legitimacy since the late seventies. Inside this interdependent relationship, the area that remained under tight control by the *ulama*, is related to women's issues.

The modernization followed by the state since the commercial exploitation of oil during the seventies has paved the way to a consolidation of traditional forms of authority known as post traditional, where authority is trapped between new forms of government (government professionalization, the strategies for the administration of economy) and traditional values and practices.⁴ These two forms of government contribute to legitimize the authority of the government. In this regard, the King is considered as the patriarch and leader of the tribes who are in Saudi territory. The way citizenship is organized follows the same patriarchal principles which the state follows, since there is a kinship contract, where the first identity is referred to the family and after to the state.⁵ But to the nature of the political system and authority, more than a sense of citizenship that prevails is a notion of a subject.⁶

Following the traditional and modern aspects of the authority of the Saudi monarchy, women are considered as markers to designate inside and outside borders,⁷ as is the case in other developing societies. The figure of nation is identified with "the women", therefore it is transformed into a symbol of morality, by which borders are designated and the identity as mother of the nation and transmitter of the traditions is ascribed to women.⁸ Their exemplary behavior

3 T. Niblock, *Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival*, (London: Routledge, 2006).

4 J. Peterson, *The emergence of post-traditional Oman*, Durham Middle East Papers, No. 78, (Durham: Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, University of Durham, 2005), p. 5.

5 S. Joseph, "Gendering Citizenship in the Middle East" in Suad Joseph (ed.), *Gender and Citizenship and the Middle East*, (New York, Syracuse University, 2000). pp. 149-150.

6 S. Altorki, "The Concept and practice of Citizenship in Saudi Arabia" in S. Joseph (ed.), *Gender and Citizenship and the Middle East*, (New York, Syracuse University, 2000), p. 224.

7 Z. Eisenstein, *Hatreds: Racialised and Sexualised Conflicts in the 21 Century*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1996) pp. 53-54.

8 Ibid.

denotes the society's behavior at both levels, internal and external. At internal level, women represent the families' honor, women is the reproducer of different ethnical groups and the main transmitter of values and behavior attached to each of the social groups. The boundaries among different social groups are maintained by women who are not allowed to marry men who do not belong to her group, maintaining the separated identities of the groups, among them sedentary groups (also known as *bidun*- without roots), people from tribal origin, the Shiites, and the Sunnites, among others.

From a social and religious point of view, women are present in a notoriously high number of religious opinions (*fatawas*), where the traditional women's role circumscribed to the family or private space are reiterated. Its passage towards the public space is marked by the use of *abaya* and *niqab*, as well as the authorization of the legal guardian (*mahram*). The avoidance of gender mixing (*ikhtilat*) is also subject of religious opinion, as the notorious Mufti Ibn Baz expressed once on the permissibility of women working outside the family space: it is obligatory to avoid the mixing of sexes, since it "leads to evil and lewdness and destruction of societies".⁹

The observance of these principles is paramount to the good name of the families. Although the legal guardian is a figure contained in the religious scriptures, its recreation is a product of the social practices by Saudi society. In order for women to obtain their school registration, admission to hospital, surgical interventions, the administration of her money, assets and business, permission to travel inside and outside the country, authorization to process the identity card,¹⁰ they need the legal guardian's approval. As one Saudi woman refers to this situation, "the only issue where we -women- do not need permission from men is to die."

The educational system also reinforces those values and practices contributing to reproduce gender differences. The philosophy of Saudi education buttresses the gender division and endorses the

9 A. Al-Musnad (ed.), *Islamic Fatawa Regarding Women*, (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1996), p.316. An analysis on how this principle and gender relations are taught in the Kingdom see: E. Doumato, "Education in Saudi Arabia: Gender, Jobs and the Price of Religion" in M. Pripstein and E. Doumato (eds.), *Women and Globalization in the Arab World*, (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 2003), pp. 244-248.

10 Women's individual identity card was approved in 2002, but in practice governmental and private agencies do not accept the use of these cards unless accompanied by a letter from their male guardian.

view of women as having a “special nature” that is different to men and therefore needs a special type of suitable education.¹¹ Since the beginning of women’s education in the seventies, the alternatives for women were few, mainly as teachers, administrative jobs and nursing and, with some exceptions, with both legal guardian and governmental approval, medicine. The statistics on women’s education show us the increasing number of them attaining higher education. In the academic year 1977/78 females attending university at the bachelor level numbered 5,658 students, representing 18 percent of the total enrolment.¹² In the year 1989/1990, females increased notably to 53,030 students, representing 47 percent of the total enrolment.¹³ Nowadays the percentage continues to grow, as well as the number of female graduates. Since the eighties, the use of technology, closed circuit TV helped female students to receive education from male teachers and increased the number of women pursuing higher education, but at the same time endorsed the traditional norms that preserve the isolation and invisibility of women.¹⁴

The areas of work also reproduce the traditional norms and constrain the alternatives for educated women to work. The segregation policy is socially and economical costly, since only a small percentage of women with higher education, 19.18 of the total force of work is female,¹⁵ but nonetheless women suffered from a high rate of unemployment compared to men. As the state and most of the private sector’s building are thought to be for men, both state and private sector have to invest to accommodate to the norms of segregation. On the other hand, also despite the regulations to exercise their activities, there is a small number of business women. Their focus is mainly in the feminine industry such as cosmetics, textiles and services for women.

As can be appreciated from these social arrangements, both government and *ulama* sustain a recreation on women as homoge-

11 F. Al Bakr, “Women’s Education and Employment in Saudi Arabia: Struggle for Survival”, *Mimeo*, 2006, p.7.

12 Minister of Higher Education, *Statistics of Higher Education 1977/78*, (Riyadh: Minister of Higher Education, 1980).

13 Minister of Higher Education, *Statistics of Higher Education 1989/90*, (Riyadh: Minister of Higher Education, 1991), p.8

14 H. Al Fassi, “Saudi Women: Modernization and Change” in J. Seznec, M. Kirk, *Industrialization in the Gulf: a Socioeconomic Revolution*, (London: Routledge, 2010), p.159

15 Central Department of Statistics and Information, “Saudi Labour 15 years and over”, Development Indicators, http://www.cdsi.gov.sa/english/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=85&Itemid=162, (accessed 2 January 2014).

nized and in the singular. Women reproduce the social order upon which the Saudi state and society rest. Women veiled and separated provided a unifying symbol of Islamic piety, when co-opted by the monarchy it becomes an ideal of Muslim women, and at the same time, a national identity symbol.¹⁶ However Islam not only is an element for the legitimacy of the monarchy, but it can also serve as a source for questioning the order sustained and recreated by the Saudi state.

The context previous to the Arab Spring

The debate on women towards the second half of the new millennium was present in Saudi society spurred by the use of electronic media that allow some groups of the society to vent its thoughts and postures, to circulate petitions for different issues locally and internationally. Saudi people who use the internet represent the 49 percent of total Saudi population.¹⁷ Women, through different fronts continued to raise their voices, like the activist Wajeha Huwaidar who circulated an international petition to ask the King for the right to drive in 2007, even during the summer of 2009, she attempted to cross to Bahrain without her legal guardian's permission, as an act of protest.¹⁸ The increasing number of articles dealing with women's issues in Saudi newspapers is an indication of how women's role is being included in the public debate. This debate is also accompanied by government measures that seek to implement some of the promises since the dialogue on women in 2004 and when King Abdullah took power.¹⁹ The new regulations on work, the opening of new private universities and the study of some majors forbidden for women in some of these new universities, the opening of work for women in several government ministries are not yet fully implemented. To illustrate this, the opening of the King Abdullah Universi-

16 E. Doumato, "Gender, Monarchy and National Identity in Saudi Arabia", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 9, No.1, 1992, p.45.

17 Internet World Statistics Saudi Arabia, (2012). <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm>, (accessed 9 April, 2012).

18 She is a notorious activist who in the past also carried out a public individual protest asking the King, after a year of his accession in 2005, about his promise to give women their rights.

19 The dialogue is product of the women's petition. The celebration of the dialogue by itself, inside Saudi context where there was a long silence on women issue was significant. Among the results of this dialogue were the provision of more jobs for women, the revision of the family law, the creation family courts the expansion of section for women, the allowance of women to litigate, the revision of law on work for women, the revision of women's education, among others. See: A. Galindo, "La negociación con el estado saudita: las tácticas de las mujeres sauditas", *Liminar*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2008, pp.31-51.

ty for Science and Technology (KAUST) where there is coeducation in 2009 raised concern among traditional elements. Since the core of official *ulama* and the religious police (*mutawa*) roles is the observance of segregation of sexes, the university opening triggered another debate among different sectors both from government, well known religious figures and some social sectors, including women.

The debate centred on the permissibility or not to mingle showing a marked division between the “liberals” and “conservatives”, but also the margin of manoeuvrability by the government and at least its attempt to continue in a reformist line. The then recently chosen member of the Council of the Ulama, Saad al Shithri, in a TV program pointed out “that mixing is a great sin and a great evil” and that studies in these universities should be looked at by the religious establishment.²⁰ Shitri’s declarations expressed the opinion of the conservative and traditional sectors, even the official *ulama*, but in the Saudi context public writing or speech on controversial matters is avoided, as is criticizing government policies. The liberals, through different articles and declarations used the debate opened by Shitri’s declarations to underline how those conservative views impair progress. It is worth noticing that even inside the official religious *ulama*, there were non-traditional views like Sheikh Ghamidi, the head of the Hay’a (religious police) at Mecca who expressed the mixing of sexes was a practice not alien to Islam, showing how through weak *ahaadiths* there is a widespread idea against mixing.²¹

Amid this debate some women reacted favouring a rather traditional position. Women from a traditional stance also elaborated a petition to the King in 2009, praising him for his role in protecting Islam and adopting a middle posture (*wastattiyya*) to enforce Islam. They asked the King to act against those persons, intellectuals, who were asking for the removal of the figure of the legal guardian, since according to them, that figure represented their identity as Muslim women. They considered those attempts to fight against wom-

20 Saudi Jeans blog, “So Much for Free thinking”, (October 5, 2009), <http://saudijeans.org/2009/10/page/2/>

21 M. Mufdali, “Ikhtilat mustalah jadid wa-adilla al-shar’iyya turaddu bi-quwa ‘ala min yaharramuhu,” [the mixing of men and women is a new term and the legal evidence strongly forbid it], *Okaz*, 9 December 2009. <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/Issues/20091209/Con20091209319589.htm>

en's discrimination and the mingling of sexes as Western ideas.²² This petition collected more than 5,400 signatures in its first two months.²³

This debate shows several trends: first that the debate on issues related to the role of women continued provoking reactions from different actors from the government, liberals, intellectuals and religious figures, but also showed the continuous balancing act between the government pro-reform stance and the religious and traditional groups. As Meijer argues, there is an ideological power vacuum left, after the death of the Mufti Ibn Baz and Uthaimin, that leaves the room open for popular and official religious sheiks to launch a campaign against reforms, and at the same time it allows us to see that both religious institutions and government are also divided between conservative, moderate and liberal groups.²⁴

Nonetheless the measures taken by the government always remain in a test according to the reaction of the society; the government could decide that it could sustain and widen the measure, but always taking time to implement them. There have been elections with women as candidates for the chambers of commerce in Dammam and Jeddah but not in other areas of the country. The policy established since 2006 that lingerie shops will be managed by women, met strong oppositions from official *ulama* and also provoked public debate, and only in 2012, this policy was implemented. The reforms and changes on Saudi women presented until here give us an idea that the advances are in certain areas, places and in certain moments.

Women's Activism during the Arab Spring

In comparison to the two previous occasions (1990-1991 and 2003-2004) when some groups demanded changes from the government, the petitions in this context included demands to improve women's traditional roles, addressing specific issues and not simply enunciations as the previous petitions. Women's demands and

22 *Wali amri idara bi amri*. <http://www.waluamree.com/> (accessed 30 October 2012). During the 2013, this site was without access.

23 K. Zuepof, "Talk of Women's Rights Divides Saudi Arabia", *New York Times*, May 31, 2010. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/01/world/middleeast/01iht-saudi.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

24 R. Meijer, "Reform in Saudi Arabia; The Gender Segregation Debate", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 17, No.4, 2010, pp. 93-94.

activities in contrast with the previous period²⁵ were focused on two issues: the right to vote and the right to drive.²⁶ These two rights encapsulate core aspects that hinder women's inclusion and participation in Saudi society. These rights have great implication for the social segregation system and touch the basis of the legal guardian figure that is at the centre of the debate.

Three petitions for reform appeared on the internet: "Towards a State of Rights and Institutions", Saudi youth petition²⁷ and Saudi Reform. These petitions coincided in demanding a division of power, the inclusion of society for the decision making process, the respect for human rights, including women and the celebration of elections for the three levels of government. The third petition contains specific points on the character of reforms, among them the accountability of public authorities and the demands for visible measures to develop a constitutional monarchy, echoing past demands from the early nineties and 2003-2004. Also relevant in this petition is their clear emphasis on the respect for human rights, freedom of expression and association, and specially its demands for rights and resources for women, asking for the removal of the legal guardian figure.²⁸ From the women's side, a declaration appeared in the internet called women's revolution.²⁹ This declaration presented core demands to give women full status as citizens, eliminating the legal figure of male guardian, and promoted laws that enforce the rights of women according to the international conventions already signed by the Saudi government. This page counts as its followers mainly those aged between 24 to 34 years and was the initiative of professional women below 30.

25 In the past women were a bargaining card between the conservative and reformist petitioners, who in order to present a joint petition left the issue of women. At that moment women from across the kingdom elaborated their own petition. Among their demands were: the end of the guardian legal figure, the expansion of areas for education and work, participation in decision-making process at both sectors public and private supported by laws, the reservation of some seats for women at the Consultative Council, the codification of family law and development of family law among other demands. Al-Fassi, Hatoun, "Ma'a nihaiat alam.. Mada turiddu al mar'a al saudiyya" [towards the end of the year... ¿What Saudi women wish-es?], in *Iqtisadiyya*, 3 January 2006. <http://www.aleqt.com/article.php?do=show&cid=737>, (accessed, 20 September 2006).

26 It is calculated that working women can spend up to 2/3 of their salaries on hiring a taxi or chauffeur.

27 This petition demands youth inclusion in public policies and participation in decision making, as well as the adaptation of the official Islam to contemporary needs.

28 Saudi Reform, 23 February 2011, Hassantalk Blog, (accessed, 22 October 2012).

29 Saudi Women Revolution, Statement, Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Saudi-Women-Revolution/188278964539309>. (accessed 20 October, 2012),

The government facing the call to public demonstrations reacted through the presence of security in the major cities, and an official warning by the Ministry of the Interior of the use of force against demonstrators. The Council of Ulama issued a *fatwa* condemning the demonstrations, printing their opinion in leaflets to distribute amongst the population.³⁰ In their *fatwa* the religious statement sided with the government and condemned those considered as deviant Muslims and therefore bad citizens.

Nonetheless in the context of tight security, a group of 60 women, consisting of women who in the past tried to become candidates in the elections and new participants formed a group to demand the right to vote and be voted. From the experience gained in the past, they launched a campaign call *al Baladi* (My Country) and used the internet to spread its campaign through a website with a discussion forum, facebook page and twitter,³¹ in early January 2011. In their website they put a series of documents that show women their rights as citizens according to Islam and international conventions. Also they programmed a series of workshops, seminars and presentations, where they trained women on the importance of voting and the aspects related to the organization of an electoral campaign. These women elaborated a statement for their campaign where they established the need to integrate women in political participation, indicating their readiness to take part in the elections and their strength in different areas of specialization that could also bring progress to the nation, but also identifying themselves in their roles as mothers more connected with the needs of the family and society. "Our goals parallel the orientations that the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques has adopted *vis-à-vis* supporting Saudi women's participation in public affairs as well as those of senior government officials towards empowering women in society".³²

This initiative was accompanied by moves from some *Shura* members who tried to discuss women's participation in order to have an official favourable statement on women's participation. Despite the efforts from both women and men, the electoral authority declared that women would not participate in the elections. The excuse once

30 I. Alawi, Saudi Arabia's Anti Protest Fatwa is Transparent", *The Guardian*, 1 April 2011. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2011/apr/01/saudi-arabia-anti-protest-fatwa>,

31 In the Arabic site the visitors number is 154, 238 up to March 2013.

32 Nahnu, Al Baladi, "Al Baladi" website. 2011. <http://baladi-sa.net/>, (accessed 20 April 2012).

more, as in the 2004 elections, was that there was a lack of preparation to be ready for women's participation. The women of the *al Baladi* campaign elaborated another letter to the King expressing their frustration with the electoral authority's refusal. They offered themselves to act as consultants and partakers in the preparations for elections to allow women's participation.³³

Once the registration came into process, some groups of women who showed up in the centres for registration of candidates in the main cities of Riyadh, Jeddah, Mecca and Dammam, attempted to register as candidates. Those acts were covered by the local and international press. One woman, Samar Badawi in Jeddah presented a legal recourse against the refusal of electoral authorities to register her as a candidate, citing the electoral law of the country, the international convention against women's discrimination which the Saudi Kingdom has ratified as well as the Arab convention on women's rights also ratified by the government, which all contradict the practice of the elections.³⁴ Later her legal recourse was declined by the authorities.

It wasn't until the decree of King Abdullah, announced in September 25 of that year, that women would be voting in the coming elections and could be full members of the Shura council, since until then it had only 12 women who acted as advisers, but only in matters related to women's issues. What is important to emphasize here is that this movement shows the unity of women in most country's regions towards the achievement of this goal, in the campaign.

Some of these women from the *al Baladi* campaign also supported the movement of women to drive. This issue had been present for more than twenty years.³⁵ This time a woman call Manal Sharif from Eastern province set up a website where she invited women to join her to drive as a way to demand the right to drive on June 17. She put a video on YouTube about her driving a car and discussing the problems women faced because of the ban to drive. She was detained for four hours and some days later she was taken into jail for ten days. Her news immediately caused support and anger of the human rights activists and once again put the case in the spotlight.

33 Al Baladi, Letter to the King, 3 April 2011, Al Baladi website, <http://baladi-sa.net/>, (accessed 20 April 2012).

34 Saudi Gazette. "Aspiring Women Voter Takes Ministry to Court", *Saudi Gazette*, 29 April 2011. <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=2011042999422>, (accessed, 20 March 2013).

35 On the account on women driving first public protest see: E. Doumato, pp.29-39.

She had to pledge to the King to renounce to her invitation in April, but still the event took place. Numerous twitter and Facebook accounts started to appear in support of Manal's initiative. Finally on June 17, the day that was set up by Manal to demonstrate, some 50-60 women in the main cities of the country took to the roads and through twitter and YouTube videos expressed how they felt. For some, it was a dream driving a car for ten minutes or less and they felt empowered to fight for their right by driving a car.³⁶ Although the amount of women was not significant, it was again a topic of debate in domestic and international fronts. Most of these women did not experience any reaction from the police, but there were some cases where women faced detentions; one of them was a woman in Jeddah who went to prison and sentenced to 10 lashes since June 2011.³⁷ This sentence was only removed after the King pardoned her, days after his announcements on allowing women to vote for next elections.

A movement called 'my right to dignity' started to appear on the internet in June 2011, supporting women's rights to drive a car. According to some sources, in the beginning this campaign had around seven thousand followers, mainly women.³⁸ Through this movement women have been able to coordinate the campaigns calling women to drive and to follow up the cases of women put in jail because they took the cars. Through their twitter and Facebook accounts, they demonstrate the activities of women protesting for their right to drive. They announced the lawsuit of three women activists against the authorities of traffic since there is no legal law that forbids them to exercise their right.

It is interesting to note how women in their statement discuss the right to drive based on the Islamic scriptures that some religious authorities in other Muslim countries used to allow women to drive: God did not distinguish between male and female, when he said in the Holy Quran: "And (He has created) horses, mules and donkeys, for you to ride and as an adornment. And He creates (other)

36 Lali Sandiumenage blog, June 7, 2011. <http://blogs.lavanguardia.com/guerreros-del-teclado/author/lalisandiumenge/>, (accessed 10 November 2012).

37 It is interesting to note that her trial was based on the old fatwa of Mufti ibn Baz forbidding women to drive. S. Jones, Saudi Woman Driver Saved from Lashing by King Abdullah', *The Guardian*, 28 September 2011. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/29/saudi-woman-lashing-king-abdullah>, (accessed, 18 March 2013).

38 Also a group to demand women to stay home appeared on the internet gathering the support of seven thousand persons, mainly men. A. Shaheen, "Women Driving Campaign Sparks Debate", *Gulf News*, 20 June 2011. <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/saudi-arabia/women-driving-campaign-sparks-debate-in-saudi-arabia-1.824115>, (accessed, 25 March 2013).

things of which you have no knowledge". This is the text that many Islamic scholars depend on to legalize driving, but the state and the religious establishment has ignored God's decree of equality and decided to take the opinion of jurisprudential evidence as legitimately stronger and more important than God's own words to justify discriminating against women and preventing them from the right to acquiring a license permit to drive.³⁹

This statement also points that through invoking religion and a sense of nationalism these women are able to subvert the meaning attached to the ban on women driving.

Conclusions

If in the past, when women defied the state openly to ask for the right to drive in a context of the invasion of Kuwait, women became the scapegoats of the critical domestic and international situation for the government and society. Then in the second time during the years of the Riyadh spring, women for the first time elaborated their petition and attempted to participate in the first municipal elections, although did not obtain the right to vote, they reopened the debate on women's role and its importance for the national agenda.

Under the context of the Saudi Spring and united in a continuum of changes in terms of airing demands and having more public spaces to present their opinions and debate about women rights, they have become more assertive claiming their rights, being heard and visualized through different means of communication (writing in the newspapers, being part of television interviews, the use of electronic means). Thanks to the experience and exposure gained, women were more confident taking advantages of loopholes in the laws – especially when their demands from authorities to register as candidates or to be given a licence to drive was not met.

Despite the limitations and the array of criticism that the debate on women stirs up from society, and in contrast to the previous occasions, women's demands for rights is not circumscribed to a small group of women. Nonetheless, thanks to the effort of those women, nowadays we can witness the participation of more women from different ages, including a younger generation that are taking part

³⁹ womentodrive, 11th statement, August 31, 2012, <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/women2drive-17jun2012>. (accessed 20 March 2013).

in the activities and demands for their rights. Women continued to campaign for their right to drive, despite all difficulties and past experiences. This trend shows us that women are identifying themselves in their status as women in Saudi society with each other, beyond the differences in social status, ethnicity and class. In this regard they represent a more cohesive group than male activists. Also it is worth noting how men recognized the importance of women's rights, as it was analysed previously, not only in their inclusion on petitions, but also in supporting women's demands and actions in the Shura, in public debates and in their activities.

If there is a growing identification on women activism based on gender identification, still the activities show us that the women movement, in comparison to other parts of the Middle East is in an initial phase. Women's demands are circumscribed to two issues, either avoiding a backlash or as a tactic to advance their demands in a less confrontational way, rather than arguing for equality for women.

Often asking for reforms on women's issues is associated with corruption, Western and un-Islamic ideas. But women in their campaigns have shown to society how Saudi they are by calling their campaign "my country", and at the same time, how knowledgeable they are in terms of religion and law. Of course their ability to express their agency and to present alternative views to traditional notions associated with their role does not go along easy with the traditionalist views, but they are able to face those criticisms with the same elements contained in those. Taking upon the symbols of nationalism and progress conflates women's demand along the lines of the official discourses. Identifying their roles as mothers whose main concern is the welfare of the community allows them to present their own construction of political participation.

Responses of the government are trapped on the issue of legitimacy, women can be considered as a negotiating card for the government to reinforce their legitimacy both at internal and external realms. The government of King Abdullah has positioned itself as championing the defence on women rights, a position that appeals to some sectors of domestic audiences to sustain the image of reformist government, and at the same time, to ameliorate the so called pressure from abroad to "open up" the political system. In this perspective it is worth to mention the inclusion of 30 women as full members at the beginning of 2013. The bottom line despite

the official rhetoric is the response of the society, but particularly those groups that challenge their legitimacy, the traditionalist and radicals. It seems that King Abdullah's administration, despite its reformist attempts, has to balance between the reformist groups and traditional elements of the society, according to the stakes involved in each context.

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