Saudi Arabia

Political Rights: 7
Civil Liberties: 7
Status: Not Free

Overview:

The Saudi government maintained strict limits on citizens' political rights and civil liberties in 2004, despite taking some steps forward in a slow and quiet process of political reform carefully managed from above by the royal family. The monarchy continued a series of national dialogues on reform and finalized plans for a series of limited municipal elections in certain parts of the country in early 2005, but it implemented few tangible changes directly affecting Saudi citizens' rights. Attacks on foreign oil companies and the Saudi government raised more questions about internal stability and contributed to record-high global oil prices. After a brutal attack in May on a residential compound housing foreign oil workers in Khobar, the government ramped up its counterterrorist efforts, achieving some success and a relative degree of calm by the fall of 2004.

In the 72 years since its unification in 1932 by King Abdul Aziz Al Saud, Saudi Arabia has been controlled by the Al Saud family, with King Fahd bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud, the current king, the fifth in the Al Saud ruling dynasty. The Saudi monarchy rules in accordance with a conservative school of Sunni Islam. In the early 1990s, King Fahd embarked on a limited program of political reform, introducing an appointed consultative council, or Majlis al-Shura. However, this step did not lead to any substantial shift in political power. In 1995, King Fahd suffered a stroke, and since 1997, Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud has taken control of most decision making. Succession questions loom on the horizon—Crown Prince Abdullah is 81 years old, and the next closest successors are also aged.

Saudi Arabia has been under intense scrutiny since the September 11, 2001, attacks against the United States—15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi citizens, and Osama bin Laden, the leader of the terrorist group al-Qaeda, is from a wealthy Saudi family. The Saudi government continued efforts to stem the flow of financial support to terrorist groups, implementing new rules against money laundering and more closely monitoring charitable contributions and organizations suspected of financing terrorist operations in Saudi Arabia and globally.

Terrorist groups that have posed a threat to Saudi Arabia for the past decade escalated their attacks in 2003 in an effort to destabilize the autocratic monarchy. These assaults continued through 2004, culminating in an attack in Khobar on residential compounds where mostly foreign oil workers lived and resulting in the killing of 22 people. The government increased its counterterrorism efforts, killing dozens of suspected terrorists, detaining hundreds on suspicion of involvement with terrorism, and claiming to have destroyed five of six major terrorist networks operating in the kingdom. In addition, the government declared a 30-day amnesty in early June for those involved with terrorist attacks. Attacks on soft targets such as foreign workers decreased but continued, with the kidnapping and beheading of American defense contractor Paul Johnson in June.

Attacks on foreigners and oil companies sent shock waves through the global oil markets, contributing to escalating oil prices. The record oil prices filled Saudi Arabia's coffers and alleviated some recent economic woes; Saudi Arabia was on track for earning $100 billion in

revenue from its oil wealth in 2004, which led to record increases in the market capitalization of the country's stock exchange.

With the largest proven oil reserves in the world, Saudi Arabia is the world's leading oil producer and exporter. The country's oil wealth and importance to the global economy are key features affecting the country's external relations, and the Al Saud dynasty uses this unmatched wealth to shape and control internal politics.

The government's dominance of the economy, endemic corruption, and financial mismanagement have led to mounting economic woes, with the world's largest oil producer seeing a decline in real gross domestic product per person over the last decade. The government has not taken substantial steps to diversify its oil-dominated economy; nearly 90 percent of the country's export earnings come from oil, and oil earnings constitute 75 percent of budget revenues. Unemployment is estimated at 30 percent, and this year, the government recognized the growing problem of poverty by announcing a strategy to create jobs and build housing for the underprivileged.

Amid the political instability and increased access to outside sources of information through satellite television and the Internet, pressure for political change has mounted. The government has responded by taking initial steps towards political reform, though it has not yet effectuated any concrete changes in the status of political rights and civil liberties. In the summer of 2003, Saudi Arabia established the King Abdul Aziz Center for National Dialogue, which has sponsored a national dialogue involving professionals and academics handpicked by the regime. In June, the national dialogue sponsored a session on the role of women in Saudi society. Municipal elections, announced in October 2003 and now tentatively scheduled for spring 2005, will provide Saudi men with a very limited opportunity for political participation.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy, and its citizens have no power to change the government democratically. The country's 1992 Basic Law declares that the Koran is the country's constitution. A 120-member Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council) is appointed by the monarch. This council has limited powers and does not affect decision making or power structures in a meaningful way. The Council of Ministers, an executive body appointed by the king, passes legislation that becomes law once ratified by royal decree. The monarchy has a tradition of consulting with select members of Saudi society, but this process is not equally open to all citizens.

Saudi Arabia does not have political parties, and the only semblance of organized political opposition exists outside of the country, with many Saudi opposition activists being based in London. The Al Saud dynasty dominates and controls political life in the kingdom.

Municipal elections, originally announced in October 2003, are tentatively scheduled to begin in Riyadh in February 2005 and take place in other parts of the country through the spring. These elections will afford Saudi men with a limited opportunity to select some of their leaders at the local level. According to electoral regulations published in August, male citizens who are at least 21 years old, are not serving in the military, and have resided in a particular electoral district for at least 12 months will be allowed to vote. Half of the seats are open for election, and the other half will remain positions appointed by the monarchy. Officials in the Municipal and Rural Affairs Ministry and the Interior Ministry will screen candidates, and all results are subject to final approval from the government.

Corruption is one consequence of the closed nature of Saudi Arabia's government and society, with foreign companies reporting that they often pay bribes to middlemen and government officials to secure business deals. Saudi Arabia was ranked 71 out of 146 countries surveyed in the 2004 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index.

The government tightly controls content in domestic media outlets, but is unable to do much about regional satellite television coverage. Government authorities have banned or fired journalists and editors who publish articles deemed offensive to the country's powerful religious establishment or the ruling authorities. The Saudi regime has taken steps to limit the impact of new media. Government officials reportedly banned mobile phones with cameras from the country.

Religious freedom does not exist in Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam and the location of the two holiest cities of Islam—Mecca and Medina. Islam is Saudi Arabia's official religion, and all citizens are required by law to be Muslims. The government prohibits the public practice of any religions other than Islam. Although the government recognizes the right of non-Muslims to worship in private, it does not always respect this right in practice. Academic freedom is restricted in Saudi Arabia, and informers monitor classrooms for compliance with limits on curricula, such as a ban on teaching Western philosophy and religions other than Islam. In 2004, the government began efforts to reform school curricula to delete disparaging religious references in textbooks.

Saudi citizens do not enjoy freedom of association and assembly. The government approved the establishment of the National Human Rights Association, a semiofficial organization charged with reviewing allegations of human rights violations and monitoring the country's compliance with international human rights agreements. Chaired by Shura council member Abdullah bin Saleh al-Obeid, the National Human Rights Association has 41 members, including 10 women. Saudi law does not address labor unions, but since 2001 the government has permitted the establishment of labor committees in local companies with more than 100 employees.

The judiciary lacks independence from the monarchy. The king appoints all judges on the recommendation of the Supreme Judicial Council, and the monarchy serves as the highest court of appeal. The rule of law is regularly flouted by the Saudi regime, with frequent trials falling short of international standards. Secret trials are common, and political opponents of the regime are often detained without charge and held for indefinite periods of time. Allegations of torture by police and prison officials are frequent, though access to prisoners by independent human rights and legal organizations is strictly limited.

In 2004, a number of democracy advocates in the kingdom mounted a petition campaign in favor of reforms. In March, the government arrested 13 reformers who had called for establishing a constitutional monarchy and holding parliamentary elections. Three—Ali al-Doumani, Dr. Matrouk al-Faleh, and Dr. Abdullah al-Hamed—were tried for creating political instability after refusing to sign a document renouncing their reform efforts. The trial got off to a rocky start in August, when the judge suspended initial hearings after hundreds of supporters of the defendants rallied outside the courtroom.

Although racial discrimination is illegal, substantial prejudice against ethnic, religious, and national minorities exists. Foreign workers from Asia and Africa are subject to formal and informal discrimination and have difficulty obtaining justice.

Citizens have the right to own property and establish private businesses, but much private enterprise activity is connected with members of the ruling family and the government. Although

Saudi Arabia first joined the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in 1993, its slow process of privatization and economic reform has prevented it from becoming a member of the World Trade Organization.

Women are not treated as equal members of society. They may not legally drive cars, and their use of public facilities is restricted when men are present. By law and custom, women cannot travel within or outside of the country without a male relative. Laws discriminate against women in a range of matters including family law, and a woman's testimony is treated as inferior to a man's in court. The Committee to Prevent Vice and Promote Virtue, a semiautonomous religious police force commonly known as the *mutawa'een*, enforce a strict policy of segregation between men and women and often use physical punishment to ensure that women meet conservative standards of dress in public.

The government will not allow women to take part in the municipal elections scheduled for early 2005. Prince Mansour bin Muteb bin Abdul Aziz, head of the elections committee, announced in October that the country did not have sufficient time to prepare for both women and men to vote, indicating that Saudi Arabia would require separate polling stations run by female election judges before it allowed women to participate politically.

Education and economic rights for Saudi women have improved. Girls were not permitted to attend school until 1964, but now more than half of the country's university students are female. In May 2004, women won the right to hold commercial licenses, opening the door for greater economic participation. In addition, women have become more visible in a society that is deeply conservative and segregated along gender lines. In January, Saudi state television began using women as newscasters. Also in January, businesswomen appeared unveiled and mixed with men and participated at the Jeddah Economic Forum, prompting the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Asheikh, to condemn the women and the media outlets that showed pictures of the women participating in the conference.