

Saudi Arabia

Population: 24,600,000

GNI/capita: \$9,240

Life Expectancy: 72

Religious Groups: Muslim (100 percent)

Ethnic Groups: Arab (90 percent), Afro-Asian (10 percent)

Capital: Riyadh

Political Rights: 7

Civil Liberties: 6 ↑

Status: Not Free

Ratings Change: Saudi Arabia's civil liberties score increased from a 7 to a 6 due to the growing impact of regional media on press freedom.

Ratings Timeline (Political Rights, Civil Liberties, Status)

Year Under Review	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Rating	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,6,NF

Overview:

Saudi Arabia continued to demonstrate signs of possible change and reform in 2005, with a new leader taking over the country and municipal elections held during the year. King Abdullah bin Abdul al-Aziz Al Saud succeeded his brother, King Fahd bin Abdul al-Aziz Al Saud, who died on August 1, 2005. The transition did not lead to any substantive changes in Saudi Arabia's political structure, with power over all key policy issues remaining firmly in control of the Saud royal family, but a national dialogue and debate on the need for political reform continued. Municipal elections took place in the spring and summer, though the partially elected municipal councils had not met by the end of November. A regional media transformation continued to affect Saudi Arabia in 2005, contributing to a slight increase in civil liberties, as regional satellite television channels, the internet, and other new forms of media expanded the available zone for debate within Saudi Arabia.

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 Abdullah bin Abdul al-Aziz Al Saud, the current king, the sixth in the Al Saud ruling dynasty. The Saudi monarchy rules in accordance with a conservative school of Sunni Islam. In the early 1990s, Saudi Arabia 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 bin Abdul al-Aziz Al Saud suffered a stroke, and in 1997, Abdullah, then crown prince, took control of most decision making.

Saudi Arabia has been under intense scrutiny from the international community 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 has taken steps 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. Though diminished compared with 2003 and 2004, Saudi Arabia experienced some unrest in 2005, with clashes between Saudi security forces and terrorist suspects occurring in the spring. In April, the government announced it had killed Abdul-Rahman Yazji, one of the kingdom's most wanted Islamist militants.

The formal transition of power from King Fahd, who died in August 2005, to King Abdullah, led to increased discussions of political reform in the kingdom. In August, Prince Talal bin Abdel-Aziz, a former finance minister and a half-brother of Abdullah's, called for political reform and a constitution in Saudi Arabia. Talal also said that the current Majlis al-Shura should be given additional powers and be turned into a "quasi-legislative" council. These comments reflect a growing number of voices in support of similar proposals within the royal family and more broadly in Saudi society.

Saudi Arabia organized elections for municipal councils in the first half of 2005, giving Saudi men a limited opportunity to select some of their leaders at the local level. Women were completely excluded from the political process. The eligible electorate consisted of less than 20 percent of the population: it included male citizens who were at least 21 years old, not serving in the military, and resident in a particular electoral district for at least 12 months. 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 screened candidates, and all results were subject to final approval from the government. More than eight months after the final municipal election was held, none of the municipal councils had met, which raised questions about the Saudi government's seriousness about political reform.

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 Saudi Arabia'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 problems, with the world's largest oil producer seeing a decline in real gross domestic product per person over the last decade. Unemployment is estimated at more than 30 percent, and a growing youth population is making economic conditions even more difficult by putting more pressure on the Saudi government to create new jobs. The most recent census found that 56 percent of the Saudi population is below the age of 20, and 45 percent is under the age of 15.

Record oil prices filled Saudi Arabia's coffers and alleviated some recent economic woes—Saudi Arabia earned \$160 billion from oil exports in 2005. The country witnessed a 7 percent increase in its gross domestic product, a 50 percent surge in oil exports, and a 100 percent increase in its stock market in 2005 as a result of high oil prices. Saudi Arabia remained on track for joining the World Trade Organization by the end of 2005, after 12 years of negotiations.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Citizens of Saudi Arabia cannot change their government democratically. Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy. The country's 1992 basic law declares that the Koran and Sunna (literally, the "way of the prophet Muhammad", or the deeds and sayings of Muhammad) are the country's constitution. A 120-member Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council) is appointed by the monarch for four-year terms. 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.

Corruption is a significant issue, with foreign companies reporting that they often pay bribes to middlemen and government officials to secure business deals. Saudi Arabia was ranked 70 out of 159 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2005 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The government tightly controls content in domestic media outlets but is unable to do much about regional satellite television coverage, with Arab regional satellite channels growing in popularity. Government authorities have banned 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. The government has blocked access to some internet websites deemed by the government as too offensive or sensitive.

In October, Saudi authorities allowed a private media company to organize a cinema for women and children in the halls of a large hotel in Riyadh—the first time in three decades that Saudi authorities have allowed public cinemas. The Saudi regime began banning such shows in the 1980s on the grounds that they were religiously prohibited.

Religious freedom does not exist in Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam and the faith's two holiest cities—Mecca and Medina. Islam is Saudi Arabia's official religion, and all Saudis are required by law to be Muslims. The government prohibits the public practice of any religions other than Islam, and restricts the religious practices of both Shiite and Sufi Muslims. 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 curriculums, such as a ban on teaching Western philosophy and religions other than Islam. In 2004, the government began efforts to reform school curriculums to delete disparaging religious references in textbooks. In November 2005, a court sentenced Mohammad al-Harbi, a high school chemistry teacher, to 40 months in prison and 750 lashes for "mocking religion" after he reportedly discussed the Bible and praised Jews.

Saudis do not enjoy freedom of association and assembly. In 2003, the government approved the establishment of the National Human Rights Association (NHRA), a semiofficial organization charged with reviewing allegations of human rights violations and monitoring the country's compliance with international human rights agreements. Chaired by Majlis al-Shura

member Abdullah bin Saleh al-Obeid, the NHRA has 41 members, including 10 women. The organization reported in June 2005 that it had received about 2,000 human rights complaints.

A Jeddah court sentenced 15 people to prison terms and flogging in January for taking part in a demonstration calling for political reform. In May, three activists were sentenced to jail terms of between six and nine years, charged with “stirring up sedition and disobeying the ruler” for circulating a petition supporting a constitutional monarchy. The activists refused to defend themselves in the courtroom because the trial was held behind closed doors. King Abdullah pardoned the three activists in early August.

In September, the government approved a new labor law aimed at bringing Saudi law in line with international standards in advance of the country’s joining the World Trade Organization. The law established new provisions for categories of workers previously not protected under Saudi law, set end-of-service benefits, established clear terms for terminating employment, and required large companies to provide nurseries to help working mothers. It also banned child labor and set provisions aimed at settling labor disputes. In addition, the new law sought to advance the goal of the “Saudization” of the country’s workforce by stipulating that Saudis must make up at least 75 percent of a company’s workforce. Finally, the law stated that women are permitted to work in “all sectors compatible with their nature.”

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. In 2001, the Council of Ministers approved a 225-article penal code that bans torture. However, allegations of torture by police and prison officials are frequent, and access to prisoners by independent human rights and legal organizations is strictly limited.

Although racial discrimination is illegal, substantial prejudice against ethnic, religious, and national minorities exists. Roughly two million Shiites, representing 10 to 15 percent of Saudi Arabia’s population, live in Saudi Arabia. Shiites are underrepresented in major official positions—no Shiite has served as a minister or member of the royal cabinet. An estimated six million foreign workers from Asia and Africa are subjected to formal and informal discrimination and have difficulty using the justice system.

Saudis have the right to own property and establish private businesses, but much private enterprise activity is connected with members of the ruling family, the government, and elite families. 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 for several years. However, by the end of 2005, Saudi Arabia was on track for finally joining the organization.

Women are not treated as equal members of society, and many laws discriminate against women. 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. According to interpretations of law in Saudi Arabia, daughters receive half the inheritance awarded to their brothers. The testimony of one man is equal to two women in Islamic law courts. Unlike Saudi men, Saudi women who marry a non-Saudi are not permitted to pass their nationality on to their children, and their husbands cannot receive Saudi nationality. Saudi women are not permitted to serve as lawyers, and women seeking access to the courts must work with a male. The Committee to Prevent Vice and Promote Virtue, a semiautonomous

religious police force commonly known as the *mutawa'een*, enforces a strict policy of segregation between men and women and often uses physical punishment to ensure that women meet conservative standards of dress in public.

The government did not allow women to take part in the municipal elections that took place in early 2005. Prince Mansour bin Miteb bin Abdul Aziz, head of the elections committee, announced in advance of the elections 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, which opened 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 2005, Saudi state television began using women as newscasters. In November, two women became the first females elected to Jeddah's chamber of commerce, a small step forward for women's leadership in business.