
Saudi Arabia

Human rights violations are pervasive in Saudi Arabia, an absolute monarchy. Despite international and domestic pressure to implement reforms, improvements have been halting and inadequate. King Abdullah's succession to the throne after King Fahd's death in August inspired some hope among Saudi citizens for future reform. King Abdullah quickly pardoned three prominent reformers who had earlier been sentenced to long prison terms for voicing criticism of the government, and announced a new labor law promising increased rights for women and migrant workers, but overall human rights conditions in the kingdom remain poor.

Saudi law does not protect many basic rights. The government does not allow political parties, and places strict limits on freedom of expression. Arbitrary detention, mistreatment and torture of detainees, restrictions on freedom of movement, and lack of official accountability remain serious concerns. The kingdom carried out some seventy-three executions as of late September 2005, more than double the thirty-two executions in the whole of 2004. Saudi women continue to face serious obstacles to their participation in the economy, politics, media, and society. Many foreign workers face exploitative working conditions; migrant women working as domestics often are subjected to round-the-clock confinement by their employers, making them vulnerable to sexual abuse and other mistreatment. The government continued to harass independent Saudi Arabian human rights defenders and stifle their efforts to establish independent rights monitoring groups.

Political Violence and Internal Security

A December 6, 2004 attack on the United States consulate in Jeddah killed nine people; al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula claimed responsibility. A series of car bomb attacks on Saudi security installations in Riyadh occurred on December 29, 2004. In late June 2005 the government issued a list of thirty-six Saudi and foreign terror suspects wanted domestically. Throughout 2005 Saudi security forces carried out raids, killing or capturing wanted men including five suspects on the June 2005 list and all but one on a previous December 2004 list of twenty-six suspects; the government gave no information on those captured. Interior Minister Prince Nayif in February said that fighting between militants and security forces over the past two years had killed 221 people, including ninety-two suspected militants. In April, the Saudi government executed three convicted militants in al-Juf, the first executions for political crimes, according to officials.

At least several hundred Saudis have reportedly traveled to Iraq to take part in insurgent activities. The Associated Press reported that on May 30, 2005, Syrian authorities deported more than thirty Saudis who

allegedly had sought to join the Iraqi insurgency. Since early 2005 Saudi border patrols reportedly apprehended sixty-three Saudis seeking to illegally enter Iraq.

In August 2005, the Saudi government released from detention five Saudis formerly detained by the U.S. at Guantanamo Bay; they had been transferred to Saudi Arabia in May 2003. In July, the U.S. transferred three more Saudis from Guantanamo Bay to Saudi Arabia, where at least one, Salih al-Awshan, remains in detention. As of October the U.S. was negotiating with Saudi officials over the transfer into Saudi Arabian custody of some or all of the 121 Saudis still at Guantanamo Bay.

Political Reform

Saudi Arabia's political reform movement focused in 2005 on the release of three prominent advocates of constitutional reform who had been in detention since March 2004 after they refused to sign a pledge to cease all public activism. A Saudi court on May 15, 2004, had sentenced the three—Matruk al-Falih, Abdullah al-Hamid, and Ali al-Dumaini—to between six and nine years in prison for calling for a constitutional monarchy and parliamentary elections. Their lawyer, Abd al-Rahman al-Lahim, was arrested on November 6, 2004, after publicly criticizing the trial of the three as unfair. In August 2005 King Abdullah pardoned the four, as well as Dr. Sa'id Mubarak al-Zu'air, jailed since April 2004 for remarks he made on the al-Jazeera TV channel, and the king later met with some of them.

Municipal Elections

The first elections since the 1960s, for half of the country's municipal council seats, went ahead in three stages between February and April 2005 after having been postponed from 2004. The government has reportedly nominated the remaining councilors, but the councils have yet to begin work. Election regulations forbade candidates from uniting in electoral lists, and limited the two-week campaigns to printed materials and meetings in private homes. The election sparked intense debate between conservatives and liberals, especially after both Sunni and Shi'a religious sheikhs endorsed groups of candidates, so-called "golden lists," which were widely circulated by mobile telephone text messaging, in contravention of regulations.

Women's Rights

Women in the kingdom continued to suffer from severe discrimination in the workplace, home, and the courts, and from restrictions in their freedom of movement and their choice of partners. The religious police enforce strict gender segregation and women's public dress code of head-to-toe covering. Women were not allowed to vote or stand as candidates in the municipal elections. Women are also excluded from the weekly *majlis* (council), where senior members of the royal family listen to the complaints and proposals of Saudi citizens.

Women cannot work, study, or travel without explicit permission from a male relative. Their freedom of movement is further restricted by a law prohibiting them from driving. While a new labor law passed in

late September 2005 reportedly expands the professional fields where women are eligible for work, they continue to be barred from jobs that are deemed “not suitable to their nature.”

Migrant Workers

The estimated 8.8 million largely South and Southeast Asian and Arab foreign workers in Saudi Arabia comprise a third of the country’s population, according to Minister of Labor Ghazi al-Gosaibi. Many face exploitative working conditions, including sixteen-hour workdays, no breaks or food and drink, and often remain confined to locked dormitories during their time off. Security forces deported tens of thousands of illegal immigrants in 2005. Arrested foreign workers face torture and prolonged incommunicado detention.

Nongovernmental organizations in several Asian countries and those countries’ diplomatic missions in Saudi Arabia documented hundreds of abuses of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, such as unpaid wages, long working hours, and physical and sexual abuse. The isolation of women domestic workers in private homes, and the lack of legal protection, puts them at risk of serious abuse. For example, in April 2005 Indonesian maid Suniati Binti Nibaran Sujari barely survived burn injuries she alleged her employer inflicted on her. The Saudi court system offers little or no redress. Nur Miyati, another Indonesian maid, in March accused her employers of torture. While they remained free, she was detained successively in a hospital, a prison, and a women’s rehabilitation center before being released into the custody of the labor attaché of the Indonesian embassy.

Indonesia suspended sending unskilled labor to Saudi Arabia from March until August 2005, when the two countries concluded a bilateral agreement on standard employment contracts, regulated weekly and annual time-off, and minimum wages. The Saudi government issued a new labor law in September 2005 that continues to exclude domestic workers, although a special annex promises to regulate their relations with employers. The law entitles non-domestic migrant workers to one day of rest per week and twenty-one vacation days annually. On July 24 the Ministry of Labor announced the creation within the ministry of a new Department for the Protection of Domestic Workers, to receive complaints and impose penalties. Deputy Minister Ahmed al-Zamil warned that employers would be barred from hiring expatriates and transferring employment sponsorships if they violate the law, and that they may be prosecuted. There was no information available on how the government applied these sanctions.

Human Rights Defenders

The Prosecution and Investigation Department (*mababith*) detained and interrogated human rights defenders during the year. As a condition for their release, the authorities forced activists to pledge to refrain from speaking to the media or human rights organizations and to cease their human rights advocacy. The government also maintained travel bans on several human rights activists.

International—especially U.S.—media attention to Saudi reform and rights initiatives has not led to changes in restrictive practices or measurably enhanced public access to information about rights

violations. A nongovernmental national society for human rights began work in 2004, but it lacks independence, expertise, and determination to investigate and publicize sensitive human rights abuses. The society visited prisons and deportation centers, but failed to monitor the trial of the three reformers mentioned above. The society remains dependent on the good will of members of the royal family to provide redress. In September 2005, the government announced the formation of a governmental human rights commission, reporting directly to the prime minister (a position held by the king), with a remit to bring Saudi Arabia's government practices into line with human rights standards.

Key International Actors

The U.S. is a key ally of Saudi Arabia and a major trading partner. The strain in bilateral relations in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks eased considerably in 2005. The U.S. agenda in its relations with Saudi Arabia appeared to prioritize measures to reduce crude oil prices, boost counterterrorism cooperation, and open Saudi markets to foreign investment and goods through Saudi Arabia's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), which took place in November..

U.S. officials praised the Saudi municipal elections. In April, then-Crown Prince Abdullah visited President Bush's ranch in Texas. They discussed educational reform in addition to oil prices and counterterrorism cooperation. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Riyadh in June, where she highlighted the detention of the constitutional reformers. Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy Karen Hughes visited Riyadh in September, where she raised the prohibition on Saudi women driving.

In November 2005, the U.S. State Department's annual International Religious Freedom Report designated Saudi Arabia as "a country of particular concern" for the second year in a row. In June, the State Department's annual report on human trafficking downgraded Saudi Arabia from tier II to III – i.e., countries that "do not comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and are not making significant efforts to do so." Responding to each of the reports, the White House announced that President Bush had chosen not to impose sanctions on Saudi Arabia.