Saudi Women to have the Right to Vote: a step in the right direction

Posted on Thursday 29th September 2011

On Sunday 25 September 2011 King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, during his annual speech to the *Shura* council, surprised his male audiences and delighted Saudi women activists who have been pushing for a greater public role in the affairs of their own country. He announced that after consultation with his religious advisers he had decided to grant Saudi women the right to vote and run for office in the next municipal elections. In his speech, the King stressed the importance of the role of women in building Saudi society, to that effect he declared that he will allow women to be appointed to the *Shura Council*. This is a powerful council that drafts and proposes laws to the King for his approval.

In my view the decision is a major breakthrough, not theologically but politically, for religiously-speaking, neither the King nor his religious advisors who he consulted brought anything new in terms of religious interpretation of the role of Muslim women in public life. Islam fourteen centuries ago granted women, *inter alia*, the rights to work, vote, elect or nominate for political offices; Muhammad, the founder of the faith, set an example by seeking the approval of women (and men) for his political career in *Medina*. In fact, those Muslim people who oppose women's leadership are theologically misinformed, since Islam allows women to hold the highest public positions, including head of state, for according to the Quran, the criteria is ability and competence rather than sex.

It has been the patriarchal readings of the faith in the Kingdom by those conservative clerics together with the political will of the Royal family at the time that continued to deny Saudi women many of their respective rights. Hence, the importance of the recent decision as real political breakthrough that lifted the restriction, albeit limited, on the public role of Saudi women. The King, who has a reputation for pushing for reforms and who is popular among women on this ground, seems to have succeeded in promoting his own reforms agenda. For this he has to be commended. There is still a long way for the King to go and the list is very long: strict code of segregation, strict codes of dress, prohibition of women from driving, banning women from working as lawyers or judges; all of which have no religious text basis and need continued political will to change.

We must welcome this decision for although it is long overdue it certainly constitutes a step in the right direction.

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