

Saudi Arabia

Human rights violations are pervasive in Saudi Arabia, an absolute monarchy. Despite international and domestic pressures to implement reforms, improvements have been halting and inadequate.

Many basic rights are not protected under Saudi law, political parties are not allowed, and freedom of expression remains extremely limited. In recent years, the government has carried out a campaign of harassment and intimidation of Saudi Arabian human rights defenders and has stifled all efforts to establish independent groups to monitor and report on abuses.

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 fifty executions in 2003; as of mid-November about fifteen executions had been carried out so far in 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.

Media attention to political reform and government proclamations regarding human rights have not led to changes in practices or enhanced public access to information about rights violations. The Saudi government established a national human rights commission in 2004, but it lacks independence.

Terror and Internal Security

Saudi Arabia's internal security situation worsened in 2004. On May 12, 2003, nine suicide bombers killed themselves and twenty-six other people using car bombs when they attacked three compounds housing foreign workers, mainly from other Arab countries. Since then, suicide bombings, attacks with automatic weapons, and hostage-taking, mostly directed against Western expatriate workers, have plagued the country. The authorities claim to have killed or captured at least thirteen of the twenty-six people they have identified as leading suspects in the attacks.

In March 2004 Deputy Interior Minister Prince Ahmad bin Abd al-Aziz said that some security detainees had been convicted and are serving prison sentences, while others remained under interrogation. The prince declined to comment on the trials, or on why they were not public. At this writing, authorities had released no additional information about any trials of security detainees or alleged terrorists.

The Reform Movement and Arrests of Activists

2003 and 2004 saw a number of public petitions calling for reforms and enhanced rights protections. In late January 2003, 104 Saudi Arabian citizens sent a charter entitled “Vision for the Present and the Future of the Homeland” to Crown Prince Abdullah, the country's de facto ruler, and other high-ranking officials. The charter urged comprehensive reforms including guarantees of freedom of expression, association, and assembly, and requested release or fair trials for political prisoners. The crown prince received a group of the signatories, and in June 2003 convened a “national dialogue conference” that invited religious scholars from the country’s Muslim communities, including Shi`a and non-Wahhabi Sunnis. A subsequent petition, in September 2003, criticized the slow pace of reform and the absence of popular participation in decision-making. Signed by 306 academics, writers, and businesspeople, including fifty women, it advocated popular election of the 120-member Consultative Council (members currently are appointed by the government) and observed that lack of freedom of expression fosters the growth of intolerance and extremism.

Crown Prince Abdullah’s favorable disposition toward the reformers, however, was not shared by others in the royal family. Minister of Interior Prince Nayif in October 2003 dismissed calls for reform as “useless barking.” When Saudi citizens, in an unprecedented initiative, took to the streets on the October 14, 2003, during the opening of an officially-sponsored human rights conference, security forces arrested hundreds of demonstrators and forcibly dispersed the rest. About eighty people were kept in detention for several months afterwards without charge or trial, while others were sentenced to jail terms and floggings; as of November 2004 most had reportedly been released.

On March 9, 2004, the government announced the establishment of a National Human Rights Commission, comprised mainly of government officials. In November members of the commission announced that they had visited prison facilities, and were preparing a report for the Interior Ministry. They were quoted in the Saudi media as saying that “in general conditions were good” but that the prisons were badly overcrowded and that approximately 80 percent of the inmate population was non-Saudi.

March 2004 also saw the arrest of thirteen reformers who attempted to circulate a petition calling for Saudi Arabia to become a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament. They also indicated their intent to establish a human rights group independent of the government. All but three were released within several weeks, evidently after agreeing to halt their public petition efforts. The trial of the remaining three, who declined to agree to those terms, began with a first public session on August 9, 2004. The official Saudi Press Agency had earlier quoted an unnamed interior ministry official as saying that the three had issued statements “which do not serve national unity or the cohesion of society based on shari`a law.” The official National Human Rights Commission has not publicly commented on the case.

The government has twice postponed elections for half the members of 178 municipal councils around the country, at this writing scheduled for February 2005. The remaining council members are to be appointed by the government. Although the elections law states that all citizens twenty-one and older are eligible to vote, and several women announced their intention to stand for election, on October 10, 2004 Prince Nayif bin Sultan, the minister of interior, ruled that out, saying, "I don't think that women's participation is possible."

On September 13, 2004, the Council of Ministers announced that the government planned to enforce existing laws prohibiting all public employees from "participating, directly or indirectly, in the preparation of any document, speech or petition, engaging in dialogue with local and foreign media, or participating in any meetings intended to oppose the state's policies." Public employees, including academics, have been among the signatories to recent reform petitions.

Women's Rights

Women in the kingdom suffer from severe discrimination and restrictions in their freedom. The Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, or the "religious police," enforces strict gender segregation and obliges women and girls to wear long black cloaks and head coverings in public. Although some women hold professional jobs at hospitals, schools, banks, offices, and elsewhere, they still need written permission from a male relative to travel.

When women are mistreated or suffer violence at the hands of male relatives, they often have no means for redress. Rania al-Baz, a presenter on state-run Channel One television, raised the issue of domestic violence in an unprecedentedly public way in April 2004 when she gave press interviews from her hospital bed and released photos of her badly bruised face after her husband had savagely beaten her. Her case galvanized public opinion and stimulated considerable debate about the problem of spousal abuse.

Migrant Workers

Foreign workers in Saudi Arabia are estimated to number 8.8 million, or a third of the country's population, according to Minister of Labor Ghazi al-Gosaibi. The majority comes from South and Southeast Asian countries, such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and the Philippines, but significant numbers of migrants also come from countries such as Sudan and Egypt. They often face exploitative working conditions, including twelve- to sixteen-hour workdays, often without breaks or access to food and drink, lack of pay for months at a time, and confinement to locked dormitories during their time off.

Many women migrants are employed as household domestic workers, and are especially at risk for human rights abuses due to their isolation in private homes and their exclusion from many employment protections. Migrant workers' NGOs in many Asian countries have documented hundreds of cases in

which such workers have suffered physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, including rape, with little or no redress.

Foreign workers who are detained by the police face torture, prolonged incommunicado detention, and forced confession. About two thirds of the approximately fifty persons executed in Saudi Arabia in 2003 were foreign nationals.

Key International Actors

The United States is a key ally of Saudi Arabia and a major trading partner, although relations have been somewhat strained in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, D.C.. The presence of thousands of active duty U.S. military personnel stationed in Saudi Arabia has been a major source of domestic opposition to the government, and the numbers have been reduced from about 5,000 in early 2003 to around 500 by late 2004, although thousands of U.S. personnel servicing military sales contracts remain in the kingdom. In September 2004, for the first time, the State Department's annual International Religious Freedom Report designated Saudi Arabia as "a country of particular concern." U.S. non-military merchandise exports to Saudi Arabia were U.S. \$4.6 billion in 2003, the last year for which figures are available; exports of military and other services have averaged U.S. \$2 billion per year recently. Saudi Arabia is a major supplier of oil to the United States and its allies. Saudi Arabian investments in the U.S. were estimated to be around U.S. \$250 billion in early 2003.

Saudi Arabia also maintains military ties with Britain and France.