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Written statement* submitted by the Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain Inc, a non- governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.


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Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and Opportunities for Civil Society

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) would like to take this opportunity in advance of the 35th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council to raise the potential for emerging homegrown civil society in Saudi Arabia within the framework of the kingdom's Vision 2030 development plan.

Vision 2030 and Civil Society

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is notoriously hostile to political civil society and activists critical of the government. Since 2011, the Saudi government has closed a number of human rights and women's empowerment societies and jailed their members. Its campaign against civil society and activists has appeared to increase in the last couple years, as Saudi authorities systematically imprison the members of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association,¹ perhaps the country's most well-known human rights and political organization, and target members of other human rights organizations.²

Despite the kingdom's record of suppressing political civil society and opposition activists, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030³ offers an opportunity for the growth of a grassroots civil society. Although the focus of Vision 2030 is the economic reform of the country, it also envisions the creation of a more vibrant Saudi society. It calls for increasing the number of operating non-profit foundations and associations, promoting transparency, increasing the number of women in the workforce, and supporting social development. While these goals, and the Vision more specifically, do not explicitly call for the proliferation of a political civil society, these radical changes offer a chance for Saudi citizens to become more engaged and involved in their communities, in public life, in development, and in government. In development models around the world, increasing such engagement often leads to political and human rights reform, including relaxing restrictions on expression, assembly, and association.

Vision 2030: economics, society, and politics

Vision 2030 is a project that will radically transform Saudi society, economically, socially, and perhaps politically. It will alter the Saudi economy by emphasizing knowledge capital over the kingdom's current rentier state, petroleum-based economic model. It also calls for the creation of an "advanced financial and capital market" open to the world to stimulate growth.

The plan will transform Saudi's social landscape through its calls for increasing cultural and entertainment projects, and empowering writers, authors, and directors. It also calls for increased women's participation in the workforce and more civic participation in local communities.

Economic Growth and Political Change

While it is possible to foster economic growth and development without bringing political change and promoting and protecting fundamental human rights, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 proposes social and economic changes that can ultimately lead to political changes in the kingdom.⁴

¹ "Saudi Arabia's ACPRA: How the Kingdom Silences Its Human Rights Activists," Amnesty International, 10 October 2014, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/025/2014/en/>.

² "Saudi Arabia steps up ruthless crackdown against human rights activists," Amnesty International, 10 January 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/01/saudi-arabia-steps-up-ruthless-crackdown-against-human-rights-activists/>.

³ "Full Text of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030," *Saudi Gazette*, 26 April 2016, <http://saudigazette.com.sa/saudi-arabia/full-text-saudi-arabias-vision-2030/>.

⁴ "Full Text of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030," *Saudi Gazette*.

One key to this is the proposed economic shift towards a knowledge and skills-based economy. This shift demands a substantial increase in the number of highly educated workers as well as the opening of the economy to foreign investment. Higher education often corresponds to a more cosmopolitan political and social outlook and a greater desire to actively participate in public life.

According to the Vision, the kingdom will also reshape itself as “a leader in competitively managing assets, funding and investment.”⁵ Pre-eminence in these markets would require a level of transparency and political openness that is currently not present in Saudi Arabia.

Women’s Rights

Currently, Saudi Arabia’s economy is oriented around petroleum. According to the CIA World FactBook, Saudi Arabia’s petroleum sector accounts for roughly 87 percent of the kingdom’s budget revenues, 42 percent of its Gross Domestic Product, and 90 percent of its export earnings. Its labor force is approximately 12 million strong, but roughly 80 percent of laborers are non-nationals.⁶

A central part of the kingdom’s Vision 2030 plan is to decrease the economy’s reliance on petroleum and the petroleum sector and to decrease the number of foreign laborers in the labor force—to “Saudi-ize” the labor force.

An important aspect of increasing the proportion of Saudis in the workforce is allowing women to work. Currently, the Saudi government claims that 22 percent of the workforce is composed of women, while other outside observers place that figure closer to six percent.⁷ The government’s Vision 2030 plans to increase that number to 30 percent.⁸ The increase in women working would require a change in the kingdom’s guardianship system and norms regarding women’s places in broader Saudi society. More employment opportunities for women are likely to lead to calls for more political freedoms to accompany their newly-founded economic freedom.

One of the barriers to increasing the number of women in the workforce is the current ban on driving. Another barrier is the regulations against mixing genders. To avoid this, businesses need to create separate spaces for women to work so that they do not mix with unrelated men. Women are not allowed to drive in the kingdom and, as a result, many women’s ability to work is sharply circumscribed by their need to receive their male guardian’s consent beforehand. A number of Shura Council members are reportedly making preparations for a proposal that would allow women to drive.⁹

The ability to drive would grant a new level of independence and autonomy allowing them to further engage in society and to seek further political rights.

Civic Involvement

Vision 2030 also calls for increased civic engagement in schools and local communities, granting parents a larger role in schools through parent-led school boards and open discussion forums.

Furthermore, increasing the level of civic engagement among parents in the education of their children and in their communities can bring with it a concomitant increase in broader social engagement. Currently broader social engagement is sharply circumscribed by government restrictions on assemblies and associations. Associations need to be approved by several government ministries, including the Ministry of Interior and authorities prohibit assemblies

⁵ “Full Text of Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030,” *Saudi Gazette*.

⁶ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html>

⁷ “Women’s Labor Force Participation Across the GCC,” Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 7 December 2016, http://www.agsiw.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Young_Womens-Labor_ONLINE-4.pdf.

⁸ “Full Text of Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030,” *Saudi Gazette*.

⁹ “Saudi to allow women to drive, say informed sources,” *Gulf Insider*, 11 May 2017, <http://www.gulf-insider.com/saudi-arabia-preparing-allow-women-drive-say-informed-sources/>.

they deem are of a political or political-social nature. Associations do not need to be overtly political--like human rights groups--in order to receive government approval.

For example, in 2015, the government halted the work of women's civil society organization Beladi, that worked to register and education women for the 2015 municipal election campaign. The government did not clearly state its reasoning for the halting of Beladi's work.¹⁰ However, human rights organizations like the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association and the Adala Center for Human Rights¹¹ also faced trouble receiving a license to register themselves as civil society organizations. Human rights groups believe their inability to legally operate with a license is because their work addressed a political and social issue, albeit perhaps tangentially.

Role for Civil Society

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 will radically change the very fabric of Saudi society, from the role of women in the kingdom, inside and outside the home, to the economic framework, to civic participation in community efforts. The scale of the proposed reforms provide an opening, and indeed a need, for the formation of a Saudi civil society that can hold the government accountable to Vision 2030's goals and to ensure that residents and citizens receive adequate government assistance in the social, political, and economic transformation.

Social organizations can form that will assist in the formation of community groups that work to address education and local issues and assist the work of municipal councils. Women's groups can form that will aid the transition of women from primarily inside the house to working and managing societal expectations. In addition, women's groups can lobby for increased social and political rights, and for the ultimate dismantling of the system of male guardianship. Human rights and political organizations can also ensure that the government follows through with Vision 2030 in a humane manner, without leaving out sectors of the populace, like the poor or the disadvantaged.

Conclusion

Development models that promote more education, more economic engagement, more community engagement, more women in society and economics, and a more open society often lead to greater desires for political freedoms and human rights. Civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations can play a central role in holding the Saudi government accountable for its promises of development. Similarly, they can channel desires for civic participation and political participation into peaceful methods of achieving broader social and political change.

¹⁰ "It Is Our Right," Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain, January 2016, http://www.adhrb.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/It-is-Our-Right_Saudi-Women-Speak-on-the-Positives-Pitfalls-of-Municipal-Elections.pdf.

¹¹ "Journey to Register Adala Center for Human Rights," Adala Center for Human Rights, accessed 11 May 2017, <http://www.adalacenter.net/?act=artc&id=690>.