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# Fights for women's suffrage outside the West

REBECCA MYERS | TUESDAY 28 MAY 2013

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Despite moves for suffrage for women, women were denied their vote in the September 2011 municipal elections, according to the Human Rights Watch, "despite a two-year delay to allow for logistical preparations to include women". This provoked a campaign called 'Baladi' ('my country') to form, campaigning to be able to vote in that election, and allegedly attempting to register themselves for a vote. The 'Arab Spring' is lauded as one of the contributing factors towards helping enfranchise Saudi women, with The Islam Daily, Observing Media (sourced from Bloomberg) reporting that, "Another group, the Saudi Women's Revolution, citing inspiration from the Arab activism that grew into revolts against Mubarak and Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, is pressing for equal treatment". That said, Saudi Arabia saw comparatively little action and protest during the months of unrest across the 'Arab world' (as the King brought in massive economic and employment rewards to maintain satisfaction with leadership), although this does not mean the 'Spring' did not encourage women's suffrage advocates to feel more confident in voicing their protests.

King Abdullah's announcement in 2011 (due to come in to play in 2015) of suffrage for women has seen western onlookers lauding it as a moment of 'Arab Awakening', in line with the patronising language of the Western press throughout the 'Arab Spring'. However, it is distinctly more complex than this, not least of all because voters – male or female – have comparatively little power in Saudi Arabia, only able to vote and run in municipal elections. As an absolute monarchy, the Consultative Assembly and Council of Ministers are all appointed by King Abdullah. In this sense, there is a lesser disparity between men's right to vote and women's lack thereof, although the injustice of a lack of women's suffrage is of course no less important. There were commentators who noted that some Saudis are hoping for an announcement of an increase in powers for the Shura, allowing it to operate in a similar manner and command similar power to that of a parliament, and who were therefore somewhat underwhelmed with the declaration of suffrage, although, as far as I saw, no women were cited as saying

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as such.

However, it is within the wider frame of Saudi society that we can more fully understand the significance of women obtaining the vote. Much has been made of connections between the recent enfranchisement of women and the fact that women are still not allowed to drive cars, a movement that gained publicity during the 'Arab Spring' with Women2Drive (twitter @women2drive) clamouring for Saudi women to take to the wheel starting 17th June. Wajeha al-Huwaider and Manal al-Sharif filming themselves driving, but it was during 2011 that the movement really got underway, with around 70 reported cases of women driving.

There has been speculation that the announcement for suffrage for women has come as somewhat a product of the grassroots driving campaign, and a campaigner, Khulood al-Fahad, 33, was quoted as saying of the suffrage announcement, "We are all surprised by this today because we are waiting for the right to drive a car... We didn't expect this." On a similarly positive note, it is believed that a move to legalise women driving will occur soon, since the lack of a woman's right to drive will look somewhat absurd against the implementation of a woman's right to vote. Concerns have also been raised about how women would campaign for office without actually being able to drive. However, the conservative strains of Saudi society should not be underestimated, and it must be noted that the King is very much moving cautiously within the boundaries of both a strict Islamic law and the criticism of the conservative branches of his rule.

There has been interesting commentary on the idea of a 'cultural image' of Saudi Arabian women – the classic image propagated in the West of an oppressed, submissive woman wearing a full Burqa – and possibly also this in the light of the Saudi nationality of many of the 9/11 bombers. Some Saudis have spoken of the idea of a poor international image due to their treatment of women.

Thus, the fact that women will be allowed the effective (or "technical") equal participation in politics as men is hugely significant in comparison to the extensive restrictions placed on the rest of their lives. However, it is these very restrictions that may hinder this political equality, even as it comes into effect. With strict Saudi versions of Islamic law, women are forced to live out their lives in public under the watch of a male guardian, which could well see women denied their right to vote by the control of guardianship by men. The King's announcement, during which he stated, "Because we refuse to marginalise women in society in all roles that comply with sharia, we have decided, after deliberation with our senior clerics... to involve women in the Shura Council as members", I would argue, highlights another worry of achieving suffrage for women, which is that it may be used to feign equality has been achieved and gloss over other aspects of life in which women are indeed "marginalised".

That said, King Abdullah's announcement that suffrage would be granted to the women of Saudi Arabia is an historic, extremely significant one, and commentators believe it highlights the King's "reformist" side. It is also extremely encouraging for believers in what one article referred to as 'Real Islam', aside from extremist interpretations, as the King is acting within the declarations of the Qur'an that women should be fully active members of society.

Women's Enfranchisement during Apartheid

[Unfortunately, sources on this topic have been much harder to come by, and my own background knowledge of Apartheid is relatively poor. However, I have tried to find interesting material on the disparity between white and black women in particular, where possible.]

One of the key features of South African Apartheid was the disenfranchisement of all non-whites, in 19 (following the 1892 Franchise and Ballot Act, which reduced the voting rights of black citizens based on property and education qualifications, and Separate Representation of Voters Act in 1951 removed black voters from the main voters' roll, placing them on a separate one, from which their rights were significantly reduced). White women could vote from 1930, and all white adults could vote regardless of property from 1931. To this end,

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women of colour suffered a great deal under Apartheid, discriminated against on the basis of both their gender and their race. Commentators argue the situation between black and white women is still very poor. In 1975, the International Year of Women, black and white women allegedly tried to unite and form common ground over various community projects. However, great disparity between the lives of black and white South African women showed as black women got drawn into the Soweto Crisis of 1976 (police opened fire on 10,000 students marching in mass protests against the government proposals to introduce education in Afrikaans instead of English. 200 people died on the first day) and many white women could not empathise, instead blaming the violent events on the coloured children.

South Africa History Archive tells us that, "in South Africa, the struggle for women's rights was central to the fight against Apartheid." Women played pivotal roles in many anti-Apartheid organisations, such as the Bantu Women's League, which then became the prominent ANC Women's League in the 1940s.

The ANC Women's League's Women's Charter, adopted by the ANCWL in 1954, is available to read on the ANC's website at <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=4666> and reads, "We shall strive for women to obtain: 1. The right to vote and to be elected to all State bodies, without restriction or discrimination." However, it should be noted, as has been the case with women's fights for suffrage across the globe, the enfranchisement of women often falls below the fight for other rights: in the case of the Women's Charter, great emphasis is placed on motherhood and family life, and suffrage receives only one mention, in the list of aims at the end of the Charter.

In fact, on the webpage of the ANC website entitled 'The Role of Women in the Struggle Against Apartheid' (<http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=4667>), none of the words 'suffrage', 'franchise', or 'vote' feature at all.

One of the major problems of the anti-Apartheid movement for black women seems to be the lack of unity between white and black women, with the ANC noting that, despite the fact that there were white alliance organisations, "the lack of a broad-based women's organisation made the participation of women sporadic". It is, however, hardly surprising, given the disparity between living conditions of black and white, and nature of family life for each. I would also suggest, perhaps, that the fact that white women had the vote caused tension between white and black women, as black women were discriminated on the basis of both their gender and race.

The South Africa History Archive cites the moves against pass books as some of "The most famous moment of women's rights in South Africa". This "took place on August 9, 1956. On this day, 20 000 women from all walks of life marched on the Union Buildings in Pretoria. They brought with them petitions signed by over 100 000 women opposing the proposed amendments to the Urban Areas Act of 1950, which would control their movement and require many to carry pass books. Since 1994, August 9 has been celebrated as a national holiday in honour of all women of South Africa and their contribution to the creation of an equal and democratic society". Notably, this march was led by Helen Joseph, a prominent white anti-Apartheid activist. This day is now celebrated as South African Women's Day.

Helen Suzman is another white anti-Apartheid activist, and was an MP for the Progressive party. She was also the only MP at one point to openly oppose Apartheid. Suzman very much took advantage of the enfranchisement and political representation of white women to have her voice against Apartheid heard.

The Black Sash was a movement of white women opposed to Apartheid, who originally campaigned against the separate roll for non-white voters produced by the Separate Representation of Voters Act. They then branched out into protesting other areas of life under Apartheid, including the Pass Laws, and aimed to use their racial privilege of having a voice to protest the racial discrimination of others.

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