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Political Participation and Political Repression: Women in Saudi Arabia

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Josef Korbel School of International Studies

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of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

Amalkhon Y. Azimova

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Advisor: Dr. Karen Feste

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ABSTRACT

In 2015 Saudi Arabian women were for the first time in history granted political space through electoral suffrage. To evaluate whether the new political opening for Saudi Arabian women has improved women's rights and equality in the Kingdom, I sought to conduct interviews to acquire their views and attitudes. In the process my encounters with Saudi Arabian women revealed their fear, cautiousness, and unwillingness to participate politically, which impelled me to discover the relationship between women's political participation and political repression. In the course of this research I learned that political repression inhibits women's political participation, and in Saudi Arabia women remain voiceless despite the new political space – political participation did not account for political freedoms. This thesis provides analysis of the relationship by demonstrating the prevalence of Saudi Arabian women's lack of freedom in political participation.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Democratization theorists suggest that women's active and direct participation in the realm of politics and governance will lead to regime transition, allowing women to participate in the political realm to improve women's political status. Generally, new democracies are emerging across the globe and there exists a considerable growth. This is due to the fact that civil society perceives democracy as the only system of governance capable of initiating the rule of law, economic justice, and political inclusivity (Svolik 2008). However, in reality all countries are democratic in their own peculiar ways, thus democracies across the world are far from identical (Svolik 2008). One way to achieve democracy as suggested by scholars in academia is through political inclusivity, which implies women's representation in the political arena and electoral suffrage. Since the late 1800s, women around the world have been actively advancing women's rights to political suffrage (Henderson and Jeydal 2007, 7-8). The first country that expanded the right to vote to women was New Zealand in 1893, followed by Australia in 1902, Finland in 1906, and Norway in 1913. Denmark and Iceland allowed women to vote and stand in elections in 1915, and the United States followed in the 1920s. Subsequently, during World War I (1914-1918) fifteen countries approved women's suffrage, and in the period of World War II (1939-1945) thirteen countries allowed women to vote (Women's Suffrage 2016). Currently, there are 193 countries that have approved women's right to suffrage and the right to stand for elections. The one country that has not done so is

Brunei; an absolute monarchy, Brunei is an outlier because it has prohibited citizens' political participation since 1962. Several countries have underlined certain restrictions indicating the type of office women are permitted to stand for in elections, thus conditioning women's access to political arena. Guyana allows women to sit on the British Guiana Legislative Council, while Japan permits women to stand for elections only for the House of Councilors (Women Suffrage and Beyond 2015). Following in the footsteps of the Western nations, Middle Eastern nations have also extended suffrage to women. For example, Lebanon extended suffrage to women in 1952, Syria in 1953, Egypt in 1956, and Tunisia in 1959. In subsequent years followed by Iran in 1963, Libya in 1964, Yemen in 1970, Jordon in 1974, Iraq in 1980 and finally, Kuwait in 2005 (Women's Suffrage 2016). Since then, to some extent, the presence of women in the political realm has become evident across Middle Eastern nations as well. Middle Eastern women are actively participating in governance, pursuing leadership positions, and becoming more vocal in regards to taboo or sensitive issues (Alhamad 2008, 38).

Scholars of democracy have proposed that extension of political participation takes place and becomes the strongest when women's civil society meets three conditions: autonomy from the regime, a prodemocracy agenda, and the capacity for building political coalitions with other social sectors. Even though civil society is present across countries in the Middle East, due to regime oversight activities of civil society remain circumscribed. Most of the governments of the Middle East establish a range of bureaucratic mechanisms in order to curtail activism of pro-women or pro-human rights organizations. Thus, such organizations become an instrument of state social control rather than a "mechanism of collective action" (Wiktorowicz 2000, 43). In Kuwait non-

governmental organizations are highly dependent upon the government's financial assistance. In Jordan, legislation prohibits social organizations from interfering or engaging in the political realm. In Morocco, civic organizations are numerous in number but lack power to pressure the King to implement reforms (Choucair-Vizoso 2008, 268). Despite Arab citizens' support for democracy and will to achieve political reforms, democracy is slow to reach the Middle East. Back in 2010, the authoritarian leaders of the Middle East for the first time witnessed a series of demonstrations from populations demanding political reforms across Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait and Syria. The encouraging signs of the revolutionary Arab Spring uprisings resulted, however, in just the single successful case of Tunisia, which achieved consolidated democracy after the overthrow of the authoritarian regime. Hence, democratic systems of governance are difficult to achieve especially in the climate of exaggerated expectations. One way to achieve democracy is through the implementation of a set of institutions that could provide for accountability and transparency, but this requires the support of the political elite and the citizens (O'Donell and Schmitter 1986, 425).

The authoritarian regimes of the Middle East are adaptive towards Western pressures that push for democratization. Authoritarian states make concessions granting women political participation without actual institutional transformation. Institutional transformation occurs when strong, independent institutions that could ensure accountability and transparency replace traditional neo-patrimonial institutions. In the absence of institutional transformation, appointment of women to political positions takes place through clientelistic linkages; in other words, female candidates may obtain seats

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through personal connections rather than based on merit or talent (Awad 2013, 275). Thus political positions are distributed to elite women from the circle of regime supporters. Accordingly, authoritarian states in the Middle East have enacted a series of political reforms that were administered through the top-down approach, without the intention of actual power consolidation (Ottaway and Riley 2008, 185). The political power remains concentrated in the hands of regime loyalists. When leaders of Arab states create political institutions, such institutions remain accountable to the leaders rather than to the people; leaders control these institutions. Therefore, today, many Arab countries depict democracies and hold frequent competitive elections without truly democratizing. Morocco and Kuwait are the most liberalized and democratized countries that have implemented competitive elections, with public debates, media campaigns and "reasonable" individual freedoms, yet the leader's power is disproportionately larger than the parliamentarians (Ottaway and Riley 2008, 182). Similarly, the Jordanian monarchy retains complete authority over the political arena and the "institutions accountable to the electorate" (Choucair-Vizoso 2008, 46). King Abdullah II of Jordan has continued to repress political and civil liberties, while intensifying the power of the secret police forces, despite the promises made to the international community. In 2001, the King stipulated under the 211 provisional law that citizens engaging in public gatherings, meetings, and rallies without the government's consent would receive penalties in the form of imprisonments or fines (Choucair-Vizoso 2008, 53). This shows that even though authoritarian regimes grant political space for women, they do not guarantee structural reforms – women hold no actual power that could facilitate a positive impact.

The authoritarian government of Saudi Arabia took a stand in favor of Saudi Arabian women by implementing democratic reform; i.e., it granted women the right to political participation. In the past, the government of Saudi Arabia continuously condemned women's struggle for political participation by justifying its incompatibility with cultural-religious rhetoric. However, on September 25, 2011 under discretion of King Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz al-Saud (who ruled between 2005-2015), the government of Saudi Arabia made a bold step towards women's inclusivity in the political arena (MacFarquhar 2011). In light of United Nations Resolution 1325 – which advocates for women's inclusivity across the economic, social and political realms of the state and encourages governments to broaden women's participation – the government of Saudi Arabia allowed women the right to vote and run for the 2015 Municipal Council elections. The King in his public statement declared:

> We refuse to marginalize women in society in all roles that comply with *Shar'ia*, we have decided, after deliberation with our senior *ulema* (clerics) and others…to involve women in the Shura Council as members, starting from the next term. Women will be able to run as candidates in the Municipal Elections and will even have a right to vote (*Al Arabiya*, September 25, 2011).

There are 13 provinces with 285 Municipal Councils that are enlisted with advisory powers. In October 2003, King Fahd bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (who ruled 1982-2005) granted an opportunity for Saudi Arabian males to have a role in political apparatus through the Municipal Council elections, in which half of the candidates were democratically elected and the other half appointed by the King. Since then these elections have been conducted every four years. In total there are 1,636 council members of which half (818) are appointed by the Ministry of the Municipal and Rural Affairs and the other half are elected. The members of Municipal Council elect a chairman and a

deputy through voting that takes place every two years. The power of the Municipal Councils remains limited, as it serves as an advisory agency to the King that covers issues ranging from political reform, environmental sustainability, provision of public services, and unemployment (My Country Campaign 2015). Even though the Municipal Councils are enlisted with advisory power – i.e. the Councilors are unable to initiate legislation and can only draft a potential legislation for the King – this is a great step for the future of women's empowerment and equality in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Considering the ongoing generational struggles Saudi Arabian women faced in the past and strong cultural sentiments against women's political aspirations, it was unthinkable that women would be finally granted an opportunity to participate politically. Political participation in the Municipal Councils could grant women not only a presence but also a voice – a voice that could open doors for a political debate. In the 2015 elections seventeen women winners secured seats; these include four women in Jeddah, one in the district of Mecca, and the rest in Tabuk, Ahsaa, and Qatif (Black 2015). About 900 Saudi Arabian women competed against 6,000 men for seats in 285 local Municipal Councils (*AlJazeera*, December 14, 2015). The voter turnout was estimated to be about 25 percent, which is considered low for a country's first experience with democratic elections. In total there were 1.32 million men and 130,000 women who showed up to the polling stations to register their vote for their preferred candidates. Whether Saudi Arabian citizens were unfamiliar or unwilling to participate in the electoral process still remains unclear (Black 2015).

The international media viewed Saudi Arabian women's political participation "as an incremental but significant opening for Saudi women to play an equal role in Saudi

Arabian society" (CBS News, December 25, 2015). The US State Department applauded the Saudi Arabian government and praised the Kingdom for the inclusion of women in elections. John Kirby, the US State Department Spokesperson, stated:

> …The participation of women represents an important step forward in Saudi Arabia toward a more inclusive electoral process that will ensure all citizens are represented in a government accountable to all Saudi citizens… as we have long said, the inclusion of all citizens in voting and governance is critical to the prosperity, stability, and peace of all nations, and we welcome this historic milestone (Kirby 2015).

However, the political concessions granted to women raised debate among Saudi Arabian women themselves. Some women such as Aziza Youssef, a women's rights advocate, created a campaign to boycott the elections. In her view, Municipal Council Elections pushed the Saudi Arabian women's pro-rights movement backward. "This election is just – it's for the West it's not for us… It's good for our picture in the West" (NPR News, December 19, 2015). Conversely, many Saudi Arabian women cheered their victory hoping for greater space in the public arena, as they believed that women's political suffrage is beneficial for the wellbeing of Saudi Arabian women and the first step in achieving a greater equality in the Kingdom (NPR News, December 19, 2015). According to a professor of women's studies at the King Saud University, Hatoon al-Fassi, "women securing local positions is important… because women could change many discriminatory rules that deals with women's financial status, women's health, women's well-being" (NPR News, December 19, 2015). Another Saudi Arabian women's rights activist, Wajeha al-Huwaider, said "…this is a great news, women's voices will finally be heard" (*Al Arabiya*, September 25, 2011). Hence, the new rights granted Saudi Arabian women a sense of optimism; as one Saudi pro-women activist, Maha al-Qahtani said, "… it is a good sign, and we have to take advantage of it, … but

we still need more rights" (MacFarquhar 2011). Similarly, Maha Akeel, a member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation said:

> …I think it's great that several women won in different regions of Saudi Arabia. It shows how much Saudi society has progressed on the issue of not only accepting, but also actually supporting women in public office, and this could mean that more change is to come. I'm surprised. We expected maybe one or two women would win (Black, *The Guardian*, December 13, 2015).

Purpose of Thesis

The purpose of this thesis is to examine political participation, political repression and political culture in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, inquiring how the combination of these factors affect women's efforts in achieving equality and rights in the wake of the December 2015 elections. In the past, Saudi Arabian citizens made numerous attempts at demanding political inclusivity and civil liberties through informal gatherings and protests. Public demonstrations sparked in 2011, when human rights activists in Qatif demanded the release of nine men who were held by Saudi Arabian authorities for years without a trial. Other Saudi Arabians joined this public demonstration in an attempt to demand political reforms, and soon protests spread from Qatif to Awamiya, Buraydah and Riyadh. The response by Saudi Arabian authorities was immediate and led to violent confrontation between the security forces and the protestors. The security forces established militarized checkpoints and raided the houses of Saudi Arabian citizens in search of human rights activists who were labeled by the regime as "terrorists" (BBC News, May 30, 2014). The elites of the Kingdom reacted with repression, censuring political opponents, human rights activists, and women's activists. The extent of political repression doubled after 2011, as the government instigated travel bans, termination of employment, prosecution and detention in order to silence political activists. Saudi

Arabian police and judicial authorities harassed and jailed pro-rights activists like Samar Badawi, who was advocating against the male guardianship supremacy, and Manal al-Sharif, an advocate for the "Right2Dignity-Right2Drive" campaign, who was arrested by the religious police for driving in Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom has a long history of human rights violations because accommodation of competing political opponents has never been a viable option (Human Rights Watch 2013).

Initially, I wanted to inquire from Saudi Arabian women whether new inclusivity has had an impact on women's rights and equality in the Kingdom. I wanted to know how Saudi Arabian women felt about the 2015 elections – the first time they were allowed to vote and to run for office. As a strong advocate for women's political emancipation and women's rights, I could not remain neutral in my research investigation. I was not dispassionate because I hold that women should be equal participants in the decision-making process - women not only ought to be present, but their voices ought to be represented in the political apparatus of every state. Through voice women could break through a discriminatory pattern enforced by a specific political culture. Through voice women could influence political elites to initiate a favorable policy that would enhance women's social positions in the country. The 2015 Municipal Council elections were a breakthrough for women's emancipation in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. For the first time women were privileged because they were allowed to participate equally with Saudi Arabian men in politics. I was curious about the topic and aspired to learn more from Saudi Arabian women because I expected that Saudi Arabian women would be eager to share their experiences and opinions. Despite the history of political repression Saudi Arabian women acquired political space. I thought

that now, Saudi Arabian women enjoy more freedom and hence would be willing to discuss this great political achievement if I approach them. For my study I wanted to know how Saudi Arabian women felt about their participation and emancipation. I sought to interview Saudi Arabian women to find out their opinions and perspectives, but in the course of this research process, I discovered that aspects of political repression and political culture were as important, if not more so, than the aspects of women's participation. Political repression mattered because it existed and impeded women's political participation. I saw this from the low turnout on Election Day – only few women were admitted as Councilors, few women participated as voters, and few women were willing to be interviewed for my study. Saudi Arabian women were not free to express their opinions and share their attitudes about the new political opening. Initially, Saudi Arabian women had great expectations; they perceived that the new political opening would enhance women's social status. Instead, the electoral process revealed numerous legal barriers that reinforced women's marginalization in the society. Furthermore, many Saudi Arabian women I approached were uncooperative and unwilling to share information and participate in the research study. This was odd because if women were advocating for participation, why were they unwilling to talk about it? What is the relationship between political participation and political repression and its effects on women in Saudi Arabia? What is the relationship between political culture and political repression?

In the course of the study, I also discovered that political culture mattered because it prevented some conservative Saudi Arabian women from aspiring to political power and women's emancipation. There are many Saudi Arabian women who strictly adhere to

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Wahhabi ideology and conform to the status quo. Traditional culture prompts women to remain politically disengaged and passive. Through generations, women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have been inclined to accept limitations in their social space, defined by strong religious-cultural rhetoric that dictates what part women shall play or shall not play in the society. The conservative Saudi Arabian women were not willing to participate in electoral process or in my research because they did not perceive political participation as a universal right; women were not interested in political participation because this was against their unique cultural ascriptions. It could be argued that the Saudi Arabian state reinforces political culture – i.e. a status quo – through the means of political repression. For instance, imposing Wahhabi ideology upon the population to maintain control over women and to prevent them from aspiring to liberal views. A lot of women conform to the status quo because they have been accustomed to it for a long time. Perhaps traditional gender roles prevented some Saudi Arabian women from voting and standing in elections, because these women viewed political participation as a Western ideological imposition that leads to a decay of genuine Saudi Arabian culture. Hence, in Saudi Arabia the low electoral turnout could be the result of the electoral barriers that were enlisted to inhibit women's political participation, as well as women's disinterest in political participation due to strong adherence to unique Saudi Arabian culture. Political culture is a repressive mechanism used by Saudi Arabian authorities to prevent women from achieving emancipation and freedom. With the help of Wahhabi ideology, the government is able to reinforce political repression and impose restrictions upon Saudi Arabian women's political activism. However, when the Saudi Arabian government wishes to obtain the support of women and international legitimacy, it

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implements a liberal pro-woman reform regardless of the strong Wahhabi cultural sentiments against it.

Therefore, for the purpose of this research investigation, I examined theories and empirical evidence on political repression, political participation, and women in politics in the context of Saudi Arabian society. I describe the barriers I encountered in collecting information on Saudi Arabian women's views, I examine the historical background of women's political participation in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and I discuss in detail the responses of women who were willing to share their opinions.

Personal Story

The fact that Saudi Arabian society is more repressive towards its women, granting women political space only recently in 2015, increased my curiosity about the subject. As a non-Arab woman originating from a former Soviet Republic and living in the Arabian Gulf, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), I have witnessed repression, gender segregation, and change towards greater equality in the Arab world. I have been exposed to Arab culture and traditions since I was thirteen years old, and I am able to understand the cultural-religious rhetoric that influences and determines women's status in society. I attended an all girls' school, since it was forbidden to mix with boys or even to talk to them, although they studied in the building next to ours and we shared a bus ride together every day. Natives of the UAE were generally intrusive, judgmental, and opinioned. Everyone seemed to care about everyone else and interfered in the affairs of others. In this sense, the society acted as cultural police ensuring that individuals behaved appropriately. Misbehavior or violations of cultural norm are frowned upon, especially in

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regards to a woman; for example, a woman should be dressed decently, as provocative clothing may portray a wrong image.

However, modernization brought in a transformation of the society's norms and customs and it increased public space for women. For example, the influx of tourists diffused Western ideas, especially in Dubai. Women were freed. Although life in the UAE is much more liberal in regards to women's access to public, economic, and political space than in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, there are a few significant parallels. As political sociologist, Mona AlMunajjed (1997) said: "We can understand the present Arabia only by questioning and probing the problems of its women." I could not agree more. Just as in Saudi Arabia, in the UAE the patriarchy is enforced. Native UAE women have to obtain permission from their father for practically everything, such as driving, attending school, or going out. The difference is that this relation is a private matter and it is usually done informally. The government does not enforce it, as there are no religious police who stop women to inspect whether they have permission to be at the mall, park, or the beach. Moreover, gender segregation is enforced only within governmental institutions, which have separate women's sections for the comfort of conservative women. Hence, women in the UAE enjoy more freedoms than Saudi Arabian women.

Saudi Arabian Women

In the case of Saudi Arabia, the state institutions are comprised of informal rules that are embodied in cultural and religious rhetoric. The informal rules include long lasting social practices, traditions, and religious morals, whereas the formal rules include codified Islamic law or *Shar'ia* (Kangas, Haider, and Fraser 2014, 7). For example, an informal rule may encourage women to pursue early marriages at the expense of

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education or professional careers. In regards to gender dynamics within Saudi Arabian families, these are strictly guided by the informal rules that are tied to Islamic scriptures keeping men in a privileged position. Adrienne Rich (1986, 149) defined the term "patriarchy" as a, "...a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men-by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, education and division of labor determine what part women shall or shall not play..." This concept directly applies to Saudi Arabian women today. Robert Filmer (1991) further elaborated on the term patriarchy in his work *"Patriarcha"* to apply to a particular type of political system, i.e. a kingship system based on patrilineality. Similarly, Allan Johnson (2005, 55) argued, "patriarchy refers to a particular type of society in which both men and women participate but which continuously promotes male privilege." Nevertheless, in patriarchal structures such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, not all men attain a privileged position; some remain marginalized, including homosexuals. Likewise, not all women condemn the system; some remain supportive and raise their children to conform to it (Bennett 2006, 56).

Saudi Arabia is a unique case because it applies a mix of cultural-religious rhetoric in order to limit Saudi Arabian women's political participation. Saudi Arabian society is a highly conservative society, in which cultural and tribal customs often overlap with the Islamic religion. Saudi Arabian women face numerous daily barriers that prevent women from acquiring social, economic, and political wellbeing. The government administers strict gender segregation that further limits Saudi Arabian women's access to public space. Saudi Arabia's human rights records in relation to women's rights have often been called into question. Although women in recent years

have been granted political suffrage, there are numerous other activities in which women are restricted from engaging. Saudi Arabian women are not allowed in coffee shops, they are banned from entering cemeteries, from reading uncensored magazines, playing sports, interacting with men, and most famously of all, banned from driving a car (*The Week*, February 4, 2016). Saudi authorities often use Islam to justify women's lack of freedom in the society. For the government, "Islam [is] the main culprit behind the incremental development in the status of women" (Sabbagh 2004). However, Islam is not responsible for women's marginalization in Saudi Arabian society, as Islam does not deter women from achieving political, economic or social positions. There are many Islamic countries such as Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh where women have achieved top political positions. In reality, it is the male supremacy, or patriarchy, that is a major force impeding Saudi Arabian women's empowerment and participation. Patriarchal structures of society reinforce authoritarianism. There is a matrix of power hierarchy across social classes; the idea of the ruled and the ruler reinforces the authoritarian culture in the society (Matear 1999, 105-106).

This thesis is comprised of five chapters. Chapter two provides a historical background of the current state of affairs in relation to Saudi Arabian women's participation and status. The chapter also identifies the role of political culture in facilitating Saudi Arabian women's marginalization and oppression in the society, and outlines women's attitudes and views towards freedoms and rights. Chapter three describes theories of political repression and political participation to explain the functioning of authoritarian states and how women's political participation fits. Chapter four introduces the methodology used to investigate the political opening granted to

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Saudi Arabian women. In addition, there is analysis of information collected to understand repression, culture, and participation, followed by a conclusion on Saudi Arabian women's political participation.

CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND

The aim of this chapter is to outline the current state of affairs in relation to Saudi Arabian women's political, economic and social status. To understand whether recent political opening has provided Saudi Arabian women actual power and brought about a feasible impact towards women's equality and rights in the Kingdom, one ought to unravel women's overall position across time through the tracing of historical trajectories that shaped and defined the position of women in Saudi Arabian society. Furthermore, one ought to evaluate the influences of political culture that have contributed to Saudi Arabian women's marginalization and oppression over time; this chapter provides explanations for these relationships. It also identifies efforts in participation made by Saudi Arabian women in an attempt to achieve women's rights and equality in the Kingdom, and recognizes the Saudi Arabian government's responses to women's past pro-rights initiatives by giving specific examples of repression. Lastly, this chapter describes electoral and cultural barriers Saudi Arabian women encountered during their participation in the 2015 elections.

Saudi Arabian Law

Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam, established in the seventh century A.D. The Saudi Arabian nation inherited these Islamic values, which led to a distinctive Saudi Arabian culture. The Kingdom incorporates about 772,000 square miles, which make up 80 percent of the territory of the Arabian Peninsula. According to the 2016 national

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census, about 32 million people comprise the Saudi Arabian population, of which only 8 million are non-nationals (Worldometers 2016). Traditionally there were no land demarcations in the Arabian Peninsula as sovereignty was determined by tribal alliances. Only with the discovery of oil in the Arabian Peninsula did territorial calculus become an important aspect that led to long negotiations between Saudi Arabia and its neighboring countries (Long 2005,1-3). Saudi Arabian society is highly nationalistic and conservative, and most citizens view Westernization as the moral decay of genuine Saudi Arabian society (Long 2005,1-3). As King Faisal has claimed: "We do not need to import foreign traditions. We have a history and a glorious past. We led the Arabs and the World… With what did we lead them? The word of the one God and the Shar'ia of His Prophet" (Long 2005,1-3). Saudi Arabia follows Islamic law, which is addressed in Article 1 of the Basic law of Government issued by King Fahd on March 1, 1992. The law reads: "The Saudi Arabian Kingdom is a sovereign Arab Islamic state with Islam as its religion; God's book (the *Qur'an*) and the *Sunna* of the Prophet forms the bases of its constitution; Arabic is the language and Riyadh is the capital" (Long 2005, 20). Saudi Arabians often promote the idea that Saudi Arabia is the only voice of Islam, and that the entire land is a holy Islamic land (Hammond 2012, 39). The Ministry of Justice administers Saudi Arabia's judicial system, and Saudi Arabian judges are bound to follow Shar'ia law (Long 2005, 20). But the law is not codified and Saudi Arabian courts are independent from the central political authority - God's law is above the government's law. Moreover, there is no judicial precedent, thus judges are free to implement their own interpretations of the Qur'an and the Sunna, which could yield different rulings despite the identical particularities of the cases (Tonnessen 2016, 2). The King appoints religious scholars to

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the Council of Senior Religious Scholars headed by the grand Mufti, forming the Permanent Committee for Religious Research and Fatwas. These judges follow the principles of the Hanbali school of Sunni jurisprudence, and are responsible for the issuance of *fatwas* (legal opinions) in regards to clarification of certain aspects in the Qur'an (Long 2005, 21). In 2009, the King expanded the membership of the Permanent Committee for Religious Research and Fatwas from 16 to 21, adding five scholars outside the traditional Hanbali School of Islamic thought (Hammond 2012, 46). The Hanbali School of Islamic thought is the smallest and youngest among the four major Sunni schools, which was founded by Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (A.D. 780-855). The Hanbali jurisprudence is strictly traditionalist as it rejects "the rational elements" of *ijma* (legally binding consensus of key jurists) and *qiyas* (reasoning by analogy to one of the higher sources) in its interpretations of the Qur'an (Tonnessen 2016, 4).

Wahhabism

The Wahhabi religious revivalist movement emerged in the eighteenth century. It centers on cleansing the Muslim faith from impurities by enforcing religious practices and piety. The Wahhabi creed is embedded in Saudi Arabia state's ideology due to a tribal agreement that was established in 1744 between the clan of Al-Saud and the puritanical Hanbali scholar, Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1791) (Husein 2014). The Wahhabis, belonging to the Ikhwan group, allied with King Abdulaziz ibn Abdul Rahman ibn Muhammad Al Saud (1932-1953) in securing the territories in the Arabian Peninsula. The alliance created a power sharing agreement between the religious Wahhabi clerics and the monarchy that is evident today in the politics of Saudi Arabia (Al-Ibrahim 2015). Wahhabi provided Al-Saud's clan the legitimacy they needed for

conquest and expansion. They used Wahhabi ideology to impose their supremacy upon neighboring tribes and local communities. This unity allowed for the Saudi Arabian clan to control most of the areas in the Arabian Peninsula with continuous raids on Medina, Syria and Iraq. After Abdulaziz took over Riyadh in 1902, his mufti was given a task to establish a voluntarily religious police force that came to be known as *the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice* (CPVPV) (Hammond 2012, 16). In 1979, following the siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Al-Saud granted great leverage to the religious police to regain control over Saudi Arabian society. The siege of the Mosque resulted in a culture of fear, thus pushing the King to initiate drastic measures. The King ordered the official Wahhabi clergy to stiffen their control over mosques, courts, and schools, which brought about an era of political repression (Hammond 2012, 25). In short, promotion of religious Wahhabi fanaticism was favorable to the rulers as it enabled the control of the population by preventing citizens from deviating to liberal views. Hence, the religious police became a mechanism of the government's power that applied coercion and repressive means in order to subjugate Saudi Arabian society to complete obedience (Hammond 2012, 17).

   The religious police adhere to strict Wahhabi ideology that denounces everything that advocates the divergence from the absolute authority of God as *takfir* (apostasy) (Crooke 2014). This ideology is apologetic and is extreme because it disapproves innovations, creativity and rational thinking (El-Fadi 2014, 208). Even *ijitihad,* (difference in opinion) is considered deviant or evil and Muslims who engage in such practices are defined as heretics (El-Fadi 2014, 223). In Wahhabi ideology either a king or a caliph signified the absolute authority on earth. If one was available, such a leader

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ought to be obeyed by all the Muslims, while those who refrained from conformity ought "to be killed, their wives and daughters violated, and their possessions confiscated" (Crooke 2014). The movement obtained nationalistic aspirations in the late twentieth century when the exclusion of women became a visible sign that laid the ground for the establishment of the Saudi Arabian state (Al-Rasheed 2013, 44).

The status of women in the Kingdom is shaped by the historical legacies of Wahhabi ideology – a doctrine that commands the right and forbids the wrong (Al-Rasheed 2013, 43). In Wahhabi ideology, woman is a symbol of sin because she turns religious men away from their devotion to God. Thus, in order to protect the religious men, women ought to cover from head to toe to avoid the seduction of men (Basrawi 2007, 34). Wahhabi clerics believe that women's hands, feet and face have to be covered fully in public because they depict *awrah,* which literally means "private parts" or nakedness (Zoepf 2016, 71) As Hannah Arendt has argued, in classless societies "periodic purges of certain social groups are necessary," and in Saudi Arabian society it is the women who serve as victims of political and social oppression (Hammond 2012, 94). Today, in Saudi Arabia, women are completely removed from the glares of outsiders, hidden by tall walls built around villas, behind a veil or the black tinted window of a car. In conferences, woman would sometimes speak out to the public through a loud speaker from a segregated compartment, thus everyone could hear her but no one would dare lay their eyes on her. The Wahhabi *ulema* (clerics) view women as a threat to the moral integrity of the Saudi Arabian community. In the past the clerics have pushed women out of social space; for instance, women were active participants in traditional practices and religious rituals (Al-Rasheed 2013, 51). In Wahhabi ideology

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women have the potential to create *fitna* i.e. trouble, thus women ought to be hidden in order to prevent them from being alluring to men. In Saudi Arabian society, women's positions are central as they are responsible for safeguarding the honor of the family or the tribe. It is expected that women display piety so that the honor of the family is preserved (Hammond 2012, 93).

In Saudi Arabia religious police are in charge of prevention of vices, and they oversee aspects related to women's behavior and the dress code in the public realm. For instance, in order to ensure that women are properly dressed in public spaces, religious police often circulate at Saudi Arabian malls, coffee shops, and parks (Le Renard 2014, 50). The religious commission every year boasts about handling over 300,000 cases thus highlighting their importance for Saudi Arabian society. Saudi Arabian women generally avoid encounters with religious police as these encounters are degrading and humiliating. Religious police never address women directly; instead, they communicate through the use of a microphone to mock women for certain unacceptable acts in front of everyone. Thus women's public humiliation is seen as a feasible punishment (Le Renard 2014, 52). Even though many families allow their daughters to wear a headscarf and leave their faces open in public, religious police condemn this measures, calling such girls religiously immoral. Although inappropriate veiling by girls strolling the shopping malls could not grant precedence for arrest in some instances, because in Islamic culture it is the man who commits a sin if he looks at an unveiled women (Le Renard 2014, 112), nonetheless members of CPVPV often abuse their power, arresting and instituting explicit violence against women. For instance, in March 2002, a fire at an all girls school in Mecca resulted in the death of 15 girls due to the fact that religious police forbade 800

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girls trapped in the building from escaping due to the fact that they were without headscarves. Since 2002, the CPVPV has been criticized internationally and within the Saudi Arabian society. In the past religious police were respected and obeyed, but today they are often mocked. To gain control and to promote Wahhabi culture, religious police often attend all girls' schools to teach students about the attributes of a moral woman. In April 2006, videocassettes circulated around all girls' school depicting a contrast of two women: one wearing the *abaya* and walking to hell, and one wearing the *niqab* and walking to paradise. This video breeds the culture of moral women as opposed to *kafirat,* impious women. In the view of the religious police, girls' moral education ought to be taught from early childhood, so that when growing up these girls will adhere to the Wahhabi ideological creed (Le Renard 2014, 111). Article 153 of the Saudi Arabian policy on education states: "A girl's education aims at giving her the correct Islamic education to enable her to be in life a successful housewife, an exemplary wife and a good mother." Initially, the ulema even prevented girls from acquiring higher education, fearing that this would push women away from their moral obligations (AlMunajjed 1997, 68).

Furthermore, Saudi Arabian women are dependent upon a male guardian, or *mahram,* without whose permission women are not even able to exit the house. Saudi Arabian women require legally attested permission from their male guardians related to almost anything they wish to do in their lives. Under the decree of the 1992 Basic Law of Saudi Arabia, the law does not guarantee gender equality. Article 8 stipulates that equality is defined in accordance with the Shar'ia law, which holds women as legal minors under the discretion of male guardians (Gender Index: Saudi Arabia 2014). In

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other words, male guardianship policy subjects adult women to be treated as legal minors. For example, universities require notary attested permission from a guardian before enrolling a woman in courses she chooses to study, and female students travelling abroad on a scholarship program must be accompanied by a male guardian during the entire travel (Hammond 2012, 99). Under the formal legal system women could seek medical treatment or employment without the permission of a guardian, but the legality of such law is overruled by tradition and religious interpretations. Men often use the role of mahram as a way to impose domination and control, and sometimes to punish women (Gorney 2016).

Without the accompaniment of a male guardian, Saudi Arabian women are unable to obtain documents issued by the government. A woman cannot travel with her children without signed permission, nor can she enroll or pay fees for her children without written consent. Every time a Saudi Arabian woman travels abroad or arrives back to Saudi Arabia, her male guardian receives a notification through email or phone. Even though Saudi Arabia Interior Ministry allow women over the age of 45 to travel without permission, the airport officials still demand a written proof. Furthermore, in the absence of female sections in governmental agencies, a woman is forced to appear accompanied by male guardian. Access to justice also implies limitations; a woman must be wearing full cover or niqab in order to be heard by the court, while her official guardian testifies for her identity during the court procedure. Such policies are discriminatory as they limit women's basic human and citizenry rights (Human Rights Watch, April 20, 2008).

Gender segregation is another factor that was instituted by Wahhabi traditions to increase Saudi Arabian women's dependence upon male relatives. Most Saudi Arabian

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women are financially dependent upon male guardians because they are banned from seeking employment in unsegregated sectors. The Saudi Arabian ulema hold that Shar'ia bans women from being in contact with unrelated men, and assert that the mixing of genders in the workforce would lead to "evil consequences" (AlMunajjed 1997, 40). The permanent Committee for issuing Religious Edicts, chaired by Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh issued fatwas against women's participation in the labor force when King Abdullah approved a plan for the facilitation of about 70,000 new jobs for women. The permanent Committee declared that women should not be integrated in offices where there is no gender segregation, thus banning women from mixing with the opposite gender. Other clerics issued fatwas stating that there should not be total equality between women and men as it contravenes with Islam (Alhargan 2012, 131). Wahhabists also advocate for the removal of women from public television, claiming that women should not appear in television programs or music videos, and images of women should be removed from newspapers and magazines. The committee also holds that girls playing sports would lead to moral disgrace; thus when Ministry of Education advocated for establishing physical activity courses, the Committee issued a fatwa against it (Dickinson 2013).

In Islamic history, the segregation of women was nonexistent. The first wife of the Prophet Mohammed, Khadija, was a well-respected businesswoman who owned and administered a caravan. It was stated that Khadija also exerted political influence; she personally financed and advised the Prophet Mohammed during his struggles. Another prominent woman was Umm Waraquah, a leading imam who recited prayers for both men and women during the Prophet's time (AlMunajjed 1997, 41). Nevertheless,

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Wahhabi clerics perceive women's access to public space through employment and education as dangerous "Western ideas," and they therefore use the rule of gender segregation to prevent women from access to these areas. Enforcement of gender segregation and maintenance of separate and parallel institutions exclusively for women costs the government of Saudi Arabia large sums of money, and is made possible due to oil wealth (Le Renard 2008, 613). For example, Saudi Arabian women attend all girls' schools and universities, they dine only in separate "family" restaurants and cafes, and there are governmental departments, bank branches, and travel agencies devoted to women. The fast-food restaurants also have separate counters for women (Zoepf 2016, 185).

Employment and Education

Most political scholars argue that women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia increased drastically after the period of oil boom in the mid-1970s (Altorki 1992, 96). Petrodollars generated employment opportunities along the service sector while also bringing developments in the field of education, which allowed Saudi Arabian women a greater participation in the country. Education permitted women to acquire clerical, teaching, nursing, and administrative jobs, yet during the 1982 recession most of these women were left unemployed. However, a prominent Saudi Arabian scholar Soraya Altorki (1992, 96) has argued otherwise, saying that females of Saudi Arabia were always active in labor employment long before the 1970s, and the oil boom just shifted the pattern of female labor employment from agricultural to service sector. According to research conducted by Soraya Altorki, before the oil boom women were active in traditional farming practices. In the town of Unayzah, women were involved in farming

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for palm trees and wheat. Some women engaged in the gathering of wood, mainly because economic hardship pushed men to allow their women to engage in such labor-intensive activity (Brill 1992, 98). In addition, women engaged in commerce such as selling their agricultural products in women's only markets. Most of these women sellers were however uneducated, unmarried, or divorced, as socio-cultural norms prevented young and single women from working in the markets (Brill 1992, 106).

Education was established for the first time in 1930s but it was limited to boys and only pertained to learning the Qur'an, mathematics, grammar, and writing. Nevertheless, obtaining education for female students in Saudi Arabia was not a consequence of the oil boom; as early as the 1950s, girls were able to attend informal schools created and run by women in their own homes. The type of education received by these girls was limited to Qur'anic memorization, yet wealthier families were able to grant their daughters education in secular subjects. The first 15 schools for girls were established in the 1960s. The attendance and enrollment rate among these schools was high, which stipulated the establishment of intermediary schools in 1970 and secondary schools in 1974 (Brill 1992, 101). Even though oil wealth provided women with quality education, which will be discussed in the subsequent section, it however inhibited women's employment in the Kingdom. Overdependence on the oil industry led to a decline in the growth of non-oil industries, thus reducing the competitiveness of the state in regards to non-oil industries in the international market (Karl 1999, 34-36). When a government concentrates production around a single commodity such as oil, it tends to impede women's equality in regards to the labor force. Oil production required intensive manpower, which pushed women out of the industry (Ross 2008, 108). Article 160 of the

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Labor and Workmen Law holds: "Adolescents, juveniles and women may not be employed in hazardous operations or harmful industries…in no case may men and women co-mingle in places of work or in accessory facilities or other appartenances thereto." Moreover, the Labor Code of 2006 promotes women's employment without discrimination but hypocritically identifies the fields in which a woman can work based on her "motherly" nature. Saudi Arabian women are permitted to seek employment in areas pertaining their "femaleness," e.g. teaching and nursing jobs (AlMunajjed 1997, 86).

Saudi Arabian women have frequently been denied access to economic resources, a crucial tool in women's empowerment that can strengthen their power position within the male dominant social hierarchy. Saudi Arabian society prevents women from seeking employment because it holds that it is the responsibility of men to support women financially (Al-Rasheed 2013, 115). Economic resources such as finance can grant confidence and voice to women, and in the long run would improve women's participation in the decision-making process (Kangas, Haider, and Fraser 2014, 51). When women are not involved in the labor force they tend to have less political influence. Participation in the labor force is important for women because it tends to increase women's political influence by increasing women's access to networks and women's visibility in the society (Ross 2008, 108). Therefore, it is crucial for a woman to be financially independent from her husband in order to improve her own social status. However, women who are willing to seek independence through employment are still limited in regards to job opportunities due to strict gender segregation laws and lack of

non-oil industries. Thus, oil production not only pushed women out of employment but also inhibited women's social position.

Women's Benefits

Even though oil wealth inhibited women's access to employment, it generated many other advantages for Saudi Arabian women. Some Saudi Arabian women who belong to wealthier families see no worries and instead have a lavish lifestyle. These women enjoy short travel trips to Milan, Paris and London for shopping sprees; they are free from house responsibilities and raising children due to the employment of a few foreign housemaids. They further are not required to work because traditional custom permits women to stay at home, as it is a man's responsibility to provide for the family. Moreover, wealthy Saudi Arabian women do not experience issues related to mobility because they can afford to hire personal chauffeurs to drive them around (Hammond 2012, 107). Overall, oil wealth prompted modernization that brought in technology, infrastructure, Internet communication, Western brands, restaurants, and banks. But most importantly it pushed the government of Saudi Arabia to promote women's access to education. Thus even non-wealthy Saudi Arabian women benefited from oil wealth because quality education was made available (Hamdan 2005, 51). For example, in 1978 the King Faisal University opened Dammam City campus for women, offering education in colleges of medicine, nursing and agriculture. In 1979 King Saud University in Riyadh opened its doors to women – offering courses in Arabic, English, history and geography. Today, there are seven universities with campuses for women, over hundred of colleges and several privately owned colleges and universities (Hamdan 2005, 51). Furthermore, oil production generated wealth that allowed the government to implement policies that

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enhanced women's education. In another prominent example, it is estimated that nearly 90,000 Saudi Arabian students have benefited from the King Abdullah Scholarship Program that sponsors Saudi Arabians to obtain education across the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. Bessma Momani, an associate professor at the University of Waterloo, reported that the program started in 2005 and was expected to continue until 2020. About 50 percent of Saudi Arabian students studying abroad are women (Momani 2015). Hence, the government's initiative to promote women's education not only contributed to high enrolment of girls in educational institutions, but also created employment for some women in the field of education (Hamdan 2005, 51). Perhaps because Saudi Arabian women acquired so many benefits that they cannot forgo, they are willing to conform to policies that reinforce women's inequality and marginalization in the society.

Women's Voices: Activists and Journalists

Women's political activism in Saudi Arabia emerged due to the sense of increased alienation from government issued policies (Henderson and Jeydal 2007, 47). When women experience a sense of consciousness towards certain injustices that they had been involuntarily accustomed to, they join a movement in a collective action to change a government policy that they deem unfair (Henderson and Jeydal 2007, 52). In Saudi Arabia, women activists advocate for equality and justice in regards to women's status in society. For example, Maha Akeela, a Saudi Arabian journalist for Arab News based in Jeddah, published an article in 2007 for the website Aafaq calling for women's equality and speaking against the dictation of male guardianship. She argues against the idea that women should be forced to seek permission from male guardians in regards to all

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matters; currently, women cannot make decisions on their own in regard to their personal matters or body, and a 70-year-old woman is forced to seek permission (written, signed and notarized) from legal guardian before stepping out of her house. This is disrespectful in regards to women and Islam, because in Islam a mother ought to be highly respected. Major and minor decisions about a woman are made without even consulting her, and as a result a woman could be forced to marry a person she does not desire, or divorce a person she loves. Women are enslaved in Saudi Arabia because society sets these traditional boundaries on every aspect of a woman's life (Lichter 2009, 287-288). Another women's advocate, Saudi Arabian journalist Lubna Hussain,, has written about women's inequality in the Kingdom. She voiced her concern about the portrayal of Saudi Arabian women in Western media as backward and veiled; for her, this does not do justice to Saudi Arabian women. She argues that when the suffragettes' movement started in the West in the twentieth century, the women of Saudi Arabia already possessed certain rights including inheritance and the owning of property. For Hussain, the obstacle to women's rights is not religion but rather religious interpretations through the lens of male supremacy (Lichter 2009, 305).

On the contrary, Islamist women activists have established a counter campaign known as "My guardian know what's best for me" in support of Saudi Arabian cultural traditions and Islamic laws. The campaign was able to secure about 5,400 signatures within just two month, thus depicting general support for religious-cultural rhetoric. The conservative women criticized international reporters who are only interested in hearing one side of a story, i.e., one that advocates for women's freedom and equality. The conservative Saudi Arabian women argued, "if Saudi women were unsatisfied with their

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male guardians they could always bring the case to the Shar'ia court for adjudication and for transfer of responsibility to a more trustworthy guardian" (Zoeff 2011). However, even most of the Saudi Arabian liberal women activists today do not advocate against Islam. They instead advocate for dismantling the misuse of Islamic teachings and the alterations of the hadith. The misinterpretations of the Qur'an are presented in a way that it used to reinforce women's inequality in society, e.g. the covering of women's faces completely with niqab. Similarly, Saudi Arabian columnist Maha al-Hujailan speaks against the imposition of the black robe (*abaya)* as a dress code for the women of Saudi Arabia. She argues that Saudi Arabian men often use religion to subjugate women into subordination and enslavement. For instance, the idea of completely covering a woman's body is relatively new because in the past women have not worn the abaya. The essence of the abaya projects silence upon women, because women wearing such garments are expected to behave in a humble way i.e. prohibited from laughing or talking freely in public (Lichter 2009, 292). Women activists argue that at the time of the Prophet Mohammad, women had both economic and political rights (Lichter 2009, 284). For instance, journalist Zainab Hifni criticizes religious clerics who label any pro-woman hadith as unreliable. Another activist, Nadia Bakhurji, took the political road to raise concerns in regards to women's inequality. In 2005, she contested the elections for the Board of the Council of Saudi Arabian Engineers and acquired a seat as the only female in a 10-member board. She currently advocates for implementing women's quotas in the Municipal Council Elections (Lichter 2009, 285-286).

Driving Ban Campaign

Conservative women may be equally active in an opposing effort to restore women's traditional roles, femininity and virtues, such as women's religious movements that see aspects of Westernization as a moral decay that impacts their sociocultural norms (Henderson and Jeydal 2007, 62-63). For instance, in Saudi Arabia conservative women perceive that women's driving is a luxury rather than a necessity. Conservative Saudi Arabians believe that if women were permitted to drive, this may lead to sexual harassment and would "encourage women not to wear the niqab in public." It may also destroy family cohesion, as Saudi Arabian husbands would be exposed to women drivers who will no longer be under the supervision of male guardians (Abdel-Rahem 2013). Hence, not all women in Saudi Arabia want to drive; some are against it. According to one Saudi Arabian woman who was interviewed in a poll that probed for women's attitudes towards driving:

> If they allow women to drive, there will be many negative effects of the whole society. Furthermore, there will be many things that don't comply with our Islamic principles. This will open the door for women to imitate men in everything, and who knows... there would be calls for banning niqab, this way a woman will lose her femininity; and if a woman goes out without a guardian, she may lose her honor (Abdel-Rahem 2013).

In a sense, Saudi women are divided into at least two different camps: those who advocate for equality and freedom, and those who advocate for preservation of culture and Islamic values. Since 2008, women activists have been registering online journals, collecting petitions, and initiating campaigns for women's rights and equality. Others have been involved in more provocative participation or illegal activities to mark their liberty, such as taking their veils off, driving despite the ban, or accepting employment

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without a guardian's permission (Zoeff 2011). Following this in 2014, two women activists – Lujain al-Hathloul, 25, and Maysa al-Amoudi, 33 – were detained for driving at the Saudi Arabia-United Arab Emirates border. Both were online advocates who supported an end to the driving ban, while calling other women to join their ambitious campaign. When driving, al-Hathloul posted footage on YouTube that depicted Saudi Arabian men drivers giving thumbs-up expressing their support for women driving (Human Rights Watch, December 2, 2014). The existence of a Saudi Arabian all-female rock band under the name "Accolade" is another impressive example considering the conservative nature of Saudi Arabian society. The members of the band are all students at one of the Universities in Jeddah. When they published their first song via Facebook it went viral, attracting many young Saudi Arabian fans. The girls in the band however do not disclose their identity, nor do they display their faces in video clips, nor use their family names. As explained by one band member: "anonymous identity online lets us thrive in this strict Saudi Arabian society" (Mcevers 2008).

Baladi Movement

When the Saudi Arabian government restricts women's access to public space and women's participation across the social, economic and political realms, women unite in collective action in an attempt to demand a feasible change. Another prominent example is when the Saudi Arabia government continuously promised that women in the next elections would be granted the right to political participation; Saudi Arabian women, dissatisfied with government's failed promises first in 2005 and then in 2011, initiated an action and awareness campaign know as "Baladi" (my country). The goal was to achieve gender equality by granting Saudi Arabian women political rights through participation in

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the local Municipal Council elections (Jadaliyya, May 16, 2011). For instance, Baladi initiated an online forum for women where individuals could voluntarily participate in educational programs that provided necessary information about electoral processes, campaigning advice, rules for registration and participation. In 2011 the Baladi initiative called for the Ministry of Municipal Affairs to adopt a quota system with at least 500 seats reserved for women in the coming 2015 elections. However, their campaign initiative was ignored (Ackerman and Asquith 2015). In August 2015, the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs ended the Baladi initiative based on licensing allegations, claiming that the activities of Baladi were not educational but rather commercial, which was not true because the educational programs were offered for women free of charge (Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain, August 24, 2015). However, the Saudi Arabian women who had created the campaign were all from well-off families; they were not faced with any criminal charges once their initiative ceased to exist. Hence, belonging to certain social class could be beneficial for women as those from upper and middle classes face fewer barriers in political participation due to access to education, networking, and finance (Henderson and Jeydal 2007, 76).

Regardless, a majority of Saudi Arabian women value Islamic percepts and tend to adhere to Islamic principles. When they speak about the government, they do not consider it to be "repressive," but rather argue that it is the society that halts the government's initiatives (Le Renard 2014, 123). Many Saudi Arabian women voice their concerns against the West depicting Saudi Arabians as oppressed. They also argue that they do not feel as oppressed; for example, in relation to wearing headscarves, the majority of women say they voluntarily choose to wear a scarf. The wearing of

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headscarves and hiding off feminine parts is a religious obligation, whereas hiding the face is simply a discourse of Saudi Arabia's culture (Le Renard 2014, 122). Regardless, Saudi Arabian women's repression does not stem from following the Islamic percepts, but instead it stems from the government's policies that prevent women's political and civil liberties. Women are oppressed because they do not have an equal access to political, economic and social space; they are barred from participation due to legal and social barriers. Saudi Arabian women require political consciousness to realize their oppression; however, this becomes more difficult since social cultures are often intertwined with the religious mores (Le Renard 2014, 61). In Saudi Arabia, drawing a line of distinction between religious obligation and cultural obligation is very difficult as it varies from family to family and from one religious scholar to another.

Specific Examples of Repressive Behavior

In the past, Saudi Arabian women's rights activists were interrogated, prosecuted, and harassed by security services and religious police for peaceful advocacy against issues like the driving ban or male guardianship. Today, these issues remain obstacles that hinder women's empowerment in the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia is well known across international social media for prosecuting individuals "based solely on their peaceful exercise of freedom of expression." The government of Saudi Arabia condemns public demonstrations or gatherings of groups; any attempts are halted by repressive mechanisms. For example, female demonstrations in one of the universities in Abha, the capital of Asir, were violently suppressed by the authorities. It was reported that about 53 students were injured (Le Renard 2014, 115). Generally, in Saudi Arabia women are not only discriminated against in regards to social, economic and political equality, but they

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are also banned from voicing concerns in relation to these issues. Thus the government has coerced women into the "culture of silence." For instance, Wajeha al-Huwaider and Fawzia al-Ayouni established a campaign known as the "League of Demanders of Women's Rights to Drive Cars" in the form of petitions and peaceful demonstrations urging the authorities to permit women to drive. Initially, they were able to attain numerous signatures that were then presented to King Abdullah on September 2007. Following this on January 2008, the King accepted that women do have the right to drive, because religion does not prevent free movement of women but social norms do (Lichter 2009, 294-295). Nonetheless, in December 2014, these two women were arrested and held for 73 days in detention for driving across the Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates borders (Human Rights Watch, November 23, 2015).

Furthermore, the story of domestic abuse unraveled the culture of silence when television presenter Rania al-Baz became the victim of domestic abuse. On April 4 2004, she was beaten by her husband and dumped at the hospital entrance. She agreed to make her story public in order to bring awareness to the problem of domestic violence that exists in Saudi Arabia. Her story shocked the world and the ruling family, who offered her moral and financial support. Her husband was sentenced to six months in prison with public flogging. She later excused her husband on the condition that he grants her a divorce and custody over their two children. Prior to the story of Al-Baz women did not report cases of domestic violence. Some conservative Saudi Arabian women scoff because Al-Baz portrayed Saudi Arabia as backward when she appeared on the "Oprah Winfrey Show," bringing her private matters not just to the Saudi Arabian public but to an international public (Lichter 2009, 289-290). However, her story pushed the Kingdom

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to implement legal measures against domestic violence and abuse instigated on women. Today, although domestic violence is criminalized in the Kingdom, there are no enforcement mechanisms. Furthermore, women who report these cases are often stigmatized and blamed for the abuse. For instance, two Saudi Arabian female human rights activists were arrested for a period of ten month for "inciting a women against her husband." Both activists were answering a message they received from Canadian woman Natalie Morin who was seeking help because of her abusive husband (Human Rights Watch, June 17, 2013). Human Rights Watch concluded that those Saudi Arabian women activists who try to stop or report abuses are more likely to get punished than to obtain protection or redress. As reported by Amnesty International in 2015, the Kingdom has reached its highest record of executions (Human Rights Watch, September 3, 2015). Under King Salman, the practice of human rights violations remain intact, political activists are jailed, and women's rights are stagnant. Additionally, the country has witnessed a severe increase in executions with 119 individuals receiving death penalties in a period of just seven months.

The Royal Family

King Abdullah and the rest of the royal family have witnessed the fall of fellow dictators in both Tunisia and Egypt. Thus, there are no guarantees that could protect the Kingdom from a similar fate, especially at times when Saudi Arabian citizens question the legitimacy of their rulers (Yamani 2011, 5). The Saudi Arabian royal family constitutes one of the largest royal families in the world, with about 22,000 male members comprised of dozens of half brothers, cousins, and nephews (Yamani 2008, 145). The Kingdom faces an internal power struggle among the factional coalitions of the

royal members; each one of them is a potential claimant to the throne. King Abdullah failed to appoint his successor i.e. "Second Deputy," a long tradition of Saudi Arabia King's succession, simply because Abdullah's authority was considered insufficient among the 22,000 members of the royal family. Although the younger generations of princes have expressed their hope to rule over the Kingdom, this would be unlikely due to the informal rule of seniority, i.e. the elderly get to rule first (Yamani 2010, 10). Perhaps if the kingdom finally obtained a young ruler, Saudi Arabian citizens could be better off, or this is at least what they hope for.

The internal relations among the royal family remain highly controversial. The former King Abdullah was considered a reformist and was even referred as "a strong advocate for women" by the head of the International Monetary Fund Christine Lagarde. Yet in spring of 2015, a controversial story about four captive princesses of the Kingdom was revealed in the international media. Four Princesses, Jawaher, Sahar, Hala and Maha were reported to be living under house arrest in Saudi Arabian royal compounds in the town of Jeddah. Their arrest stems from their active support for Saudi Arabian women's equality and rights. Their mother Alanoud al-Fayez, an ex-wife of King Abdullah, resides in the United Kingdom. She began a movement on Twitter under the hashtag #FreeThe4, asking the Saudi Arabian King to free her four daughters who are held illegitimately in captivity under "dreadful" conditions (Tharoor 2015).

Not surprisingly, members of the royal family quite often become advocates of women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia to gain legitimacy through the support of women. The entrepreneurial sector is closely linked with the royal family, and it is usually a member of the royal family who promotes and engages in philanthropic work in

advancing women's issues and fighting for women's freedom. For example, Prince Al Waleed bin Talal claimed in an interview: "I will spend whatever God has given me to promote the cause of ladies here in Saudi Arabia. Money is not an issue at all" (Le Renard 2014, 44-45). Consequently, the Al Waleed bin Talal Foundation is a philanthropic arm of HRH Prince Al Waleed bin Talal's Kingdom Holding Company. The foundation promotes Saudi Arabian women's empowerment, while also working to eradicate poverty around the world (Women's Islamic Initiative, 2015). The Prince is also the owner of Rotana TV channel, which features women singers, actresses, and shows hosted by Saudi Arabian women. In 2007, LBC presented a show called "More than a Woman," dedicated to Saudi Arabian women and hosted by filmmaker Haifaa Mansour, where issues related to gender segregation, women's immobility and the absence of women in the Shura Council were raised for heated debate. As a result, there now exists a plethora of women presenters in Saudi Arabian media channels; women leading news, entertainment programs and "political discussions" within the limits of what the Kingdom allows and tolerates (Hammond 2012, 194-195).

The media empire owned by the members of the Al-Saud royal family dominates the pan-Arab media as well, providing entertainment, political, and religious programs. The empire presents Saudi Arabia as liberal, moderate and modern (Hammond 2012, 189), while also depicting the population of Saudi Arabia as homogenous, and portraying a country in which the government does not face internal political pressures (Hammond 2012, 192). When journalists report about political issues or controversy, they often face legal consequences. For example, the Ministry of Interior issues travel bans to prevent journalists from traveling abroad, ensuring that unfavorable information does not reach

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the Western media (Hammond 2012, 196). Many journalists argue that although they feel encouraged to report in Saudi Arabian media, they also clearly know the limits and boundaries they are not supposed to cross (Hammond 2012, 199).

One of the survival mechanisms incorporated by the ruling family of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the "clientelism" approach to politics. The ruling family is highly pluralistic in its views, opinions and attitudes, and operates as a number of modern political factions. Each faction tries to allocate resources in order to attract more members or clientele to their organization in order to acquire a strong position in the political arena. The fragmentation among the royalty permits some choice to Saudi Arabian citizens. Most of Saudi Arabian non-governmental organizations established by Saudi Arabian elites whose advocacy is in line with women's rights incorporate a royalty patron. For example, the patron allows a charity to bypass certain legislation or bureaucracy. Thus, using members of the royalty permits citizens to "get things happening" in non-governmental organizations as a fast route to a change (Montagu 2010, 77).

As a result, the ruling family of Saudi Arabia is well known for its acts of kindness, and these acts in the form of "gifts" are sometimes granted to prevent citizens from participating in political activities like political rallies, demonstrations, and protests that could undermine stability in the Kingdom. During the events of the "Arab Spring" uprisings in 2011, King Abdullah, fearing the spillovers from the unsteady neighboring countries, initiated a development fund of $35 billion to help Saudi Arabian nationals "buy homes, start business, attain education or get married" in order to halt the possibility of popular unrest. Moreover, it became a popular practice among Saudi Arabian Kings to

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publicize their acts of kindness, such as writing off debts owned by nationals, or initiating a release of offenders from jail (NBC News, February 23, 2011). For instance, families of political activists would often write to the incumbent King asking for forgiveness and requesting that he pardon the offender (Human Rights Watch, June 17, 2013). Similarly, the new King Salman, in celebration of his coronation in 2015, declared he would give $32 billion to Saudi Arabian citizens despite the falling oil prices. A portion of the amount would be distributed among Saudi Arabian employees in the form of a "bonus" to their salaries, which was estimated to be "twice a worker's salary" (Weber 2015). Hence, the royal family members continuously engage in neutralizing political opponents and dissidents through gifting and patronage. Moreover, the ruling family of Saudi Arabia applies the same strategy to the international reporters and the media, buying favorable media coverage. For instance, WikiLeaks published communication between the Saudi Arabian government and Kingdom's embassies, revealing Saudi Arabia's efforts to improve its image abroad (Sputnik International, September 17, 2015).

As a result, a lot of pro-women's rights activists took their protests against the government's discriminatory polices to social media. For example, Eman Al-Nafjan advocates for political reform in her blog Saudiwoman's weblog. In her Twitter account she promotes political transformation, and her message reads: "What most agree on across liberal and Islamist factions, is more like a Norwegian model – a constitutional monarchy with an elected PM and parliament and a welfare system that reflects how rich the country is" (Rifai 2014, 502). Conversely, the Internet also provides the means for Wahhabi clerics to articulate their messages to broader audience. Due to a plethora of Saudi Arabian clerics and competition among them, each establishes his own website

where he provides religious opinions to public. Saudi Arabian citizens are dependent upon the opinions of religious scholars, and because of competition among the clerics, Saudi Arabians often engage in cherry picking to find a particular cleric with whose views they intend to agree most (Hammond 2012, 17). Saudi Arabian clerics therefore remain extremely powerful and are able to exert a lot of influence in the society.

As aforementioned evidence shows, the Saudi Arabian state controls society through repression and fear, while the Wahhabi fundamentalists control society through an ideology. The abundance of oil permitted the government of Saudi Arabia to suppress both civil and political liberties and enforce Wahhabi ideology. Oil wealth allowed the government to impose strict gender segregation policies that further inhibited women's access to political, economic and social space. Meanwhile, policies of male guardianship reinforced patriarchy, disenfranchised women, and increased their dependence upon male guardians. Continuous marginalization of Saudi Arabian women by the state and the religious police pushed women to mobilize their efforts in attempt to demand social change. This time Saudi Arabian women's efforts were not left unnoticed, as the ruling family finally granted women political space. Perhaps because Saudi Arabian women's efforts at some point were presumed threatening to the internal legitimacy and stability of the regime, the rulers of the Kingdom granted women the right to political participation. Yet, when women raise the slightest discontent in regards to state's policies, they are subjected to harassment and inhumane punishments. Thus Saudi Arabian women's political participation involves many limitations.

December 2015 Elections

With the new political concessions, many Saudi Arabian women activists were predicting that no women would be voted into office due to discriminatory policies that were established by the government to limit women from participation. Human Rights Watch stated that women voters faced multiple barriers during the registration process (September 3, 2015). The government established "single-sex voter registration centers, but only one third were devoted to women" (Aldosari 2015). To be eligible to cast a vote, women were asked to present their national identification cards, which is problematic as the majority of women carry family identification cards. Another constraint women faced was providing proof of residency, which is difficult as Saudi Arabian women generally do not own property or pay utility bills due to the law of male guardianship. In order to be eligible to participate in the elections, women had to prove their relation to the property holder through family ID cards, which are often in the hands of male guardians. In order to obtain an ID card, women were required to report to district clerics with necessary residency documents that were not easily accessible or available (Aldosari 2015). Moreover, men could always block women's aspirations and will for political participation (Barker 2015).

Not surprisingly, even though women were granted political participation in regards to voting, most women were reluctant to use this opportunity in the 2015 Municipal Council Elections. The lack of women's political participation is explained by some scholars in terms of women being passive actors in regards to politics. Others propose that the low turnout of women is due to their family responsibilities. Women who did participate in the political apparatus were usually from a highly educated social

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class (Henderson and Jeydal 2007, 9). Nevertheless, historically the rate of women's political empowerment in the world remained low. Obstacles to women's political participation include access to finances and education, presence of social networks, and flexibility with time (Henderson and Jeydal 2007). In Saudi Arabia many female candidates were disqualified due to insufficient documentations, and they were further unable to appeal due to the short two-week electoral period (Aldosari 2015). Moreover, women candidates expressed dissatisfaction with the review board; some complained that they were unjustly removed from participation. For instance, women writers and activists for human rights were unfairly disqualified from candidacy. Thus the background of each woman candidate was thoroughly pre-checked upon application to ensure that only "safe candidates" were permitted to stand in elections (Aldosari 2015). Others had an insufficient budget to finance their campaigning platform. Some candidates in Saudi Arabia, like Al-Sadah from the town of Qatif, had very little budget for campaigning and her campaign activities were set off in her own house where both male and female colleagues helped her develop a strategy for spreading her campaign message (Gorney 2016).

Other obstacles in women's political participation involved strict campaign regulations that banned women from directly addressing male voters except through a male representative or guardian, and regulations preventing women from attaching their personal images when campaigning (Aldosari 2015). Hence, cultural barriers are another explanation for women's lack of access to political power (Henderson and Jeydal 2007, 15). The better the social attitude towards women's political participation, the more likely women are able to access the office. Another limitation in Saudi Arabia that prevented

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women candidates from securing votes was the lack of Saudi Arabian women voters' enthusiasm in participation. On the designated election day, Saudi Arabian women were reluctant to register to cast their votes due to the cumbersome registration process. Women thought that it was a lot of effort to vote for candidates "in position of no consequence," because their decisions were in the end only consultative with no actual power of influence (Gorney 2016). Often in many cultures political positions are associated with masculinity, and women are seen as too politically passive and dependent for them to be considered for a position. However, when women are able to exhibit appropriate traits, then the society views them as deviant or abnormal (Henderson and Jeydal 2007, 17). Society often believes that a woman's political position would interfere with her family obligations. Consequently, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia publically scolded women for aspiring for political power, and in his televised speech he encouraged Saudi Arabian voters not to cast votes in favor of female candidates. There were other incidents of cultural discontent; for example, men tearing banners that listed names of female candidates of their tribe (Aldosari, 2015).

It is odd that in a society with restrictions against women in law, employment, and education the government of Saudi Arabia holds open elections in which women have the right to vote and stand in elections. In a society where women witness numerous barriers on a daily basis – Wahhabism, patriarchy and traditional gender roles – the Saudi Arabian government created a political space for women. Hence, in the next chapter, to understand why authoritarian states sometime behave in this manner (i.e. permitting and/or repressing political freedoms), I will look into the question more closely with the help of theories of political repression, political participation, and women in politics.

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CHAPTER THREE: THEORIES

In this chapter I will examine theories of political repression and political participation that are relevant to my study in the context of authoritarian states. I perceive that the level of political repression will determine the level of political freedoms granted to citizens; if citizens feel they are limited in their expression and participation in the affairs of the state, then most likely it is because such states use repression to coerce citizens into submissive rule. Particularly, I hold that two theories could guide me in my quest to find the attitudes and feelings of Saudi Arabian women who are trying to advance women's rights in the Kingdom: the theory of political repression and political participation. If Saudi Arabian women refrain from expressing their opinions despite the new opening, then it is possible that political repression is still prevalent in the state, which limits Saudi Arabian women's participation. In order to understand the functioning of an authoritarian state and how women's political participation fits into it, I will describe theories of political repression, political participation, and women in politics.

Authoritarian governments often grant some political participation to citizens in order to withstand popular dissatisfaction, which could yield political unrest (Ottaway and Choucair-Vizoso 2008, 53). In the Middle East, Arab leaders often establish democratic arrangements, one of which is granting women an active role in the realm of politics and governance. Such arrangements are usually limited in scope and incorporate hidden agendas of the ruling elite; for example, under former Egyptian President Hosni

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Mubarak, positions in the Egyptian National Council for Women were distributed to regime loyalists, i.e. the elite women (Dawoud 2012, 160). This does not serve as a guarantee of actual democratic reform; instead, it may reinforce elitism and clientelism in the political system. Therefore, the political systems of the world are not homogenous; many Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes implement or mimic some democratic arrangements perhaps for the purpose of regime survival in order to withstand popular unrest by gaining internal legitimacy. Scholars in the literature propose that one possible reason behind the survival of an authoritarian state is the absence of an independent and active civil society that operates outside the control of the ruling class. State controlled media and repressive strategies carried out by governments against civil activists also contribute to the trend (Diamond 1994).

Political Repression

Political repression is defined as maltreatment of individuals for the purpose of limiting or forbidding their ability to take part in the political life of society. The oppressive state that seeks to subordinate individuals to the state's authority limits their freedom and participation in non-institutional efforts for demanding social, cultural, economic or political change (Earl 2011, 262). Repression undermines political and civil liberties, and it tends to eliminate independent media, ban informal gatherings, and discourage social movements. Thus repression serves as a sign of a state's power or the accumulation of a state's strength. Charles Tilly (1978) has defined political repression broadly as actions that force protests to be expensive. The relationship between political dissent and repression is considered to be direct and linear (Davenport 1995, 684); the

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repressive efforts of the state increase with the increase of dissident behaviors against the state. The type of dissident behavior – i.e. whether it is violent or nonviolent conflict behavior – determines the state's "repressive propensity"" (Hibbs 1973; Gupta et al. 1993). Thus the threat posed by political dissidents ought to be analyzed in multidimensional ways, i.e. in accordance with the degree of threat perceived. Nevertheless, multidimensional threat perception is not universal; it varies across the political-economic dynamics of each state (Davenport 1995, 707). Repression is directly in line with authoritarian political systems.

Stephan Linz's classification of authoritarian regimes includes sultanism - a highly personalistic and unconstrained leadership (1978, 46) where the ruling elite is not constrained by interest groups, law or ideology. Supporters of the ruler are granted rewards for their loyalty, while others "submit in fear" (Linz 1978, 48). Loyalty to the sultan is expressed through total submission (Linz, 1978, 45). In such regimes, independent and autonomous institutions become almost nonexistent; instead, they are the personal property of the sultan. Social organizations become either constrained by policies that disallow political activity, or become entirely banned. Meanwhile, abundance of natural endowments helps the sultan to maintain control over the population. Sulantistic regimes are termed as a "disorganized form of despotism" which sustains itself through terror (Linz 1978, 45). Such regimes fear rebellion from the population; hence they instigate violence in order to suppress rebellious attempts (Valentino, Huth, and Lindsey 2004). The security forces of sultanistic regimes often implement "selective violence" – i.e. the use of torture – to obtain confession for

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denunciations, followed by targeting dissident individuals who pose a threat or incite the crowd against the regime (Kalyvas 2006). When governments hold strict control over their populations through security and intelligence forces, the likelihood of citizens' defection becomes minimal due to fear of surveillance and coercion (Kalyvas 2006).

Such regimes are likely to undergo a revolutionary overthrow at some point in history (Goodwin 2001). According to Ted Gurr (1986, 24), who predicted that the "capacity of coercive apparatus of the state is the direct result of chronic war participation," reliance on repression increases when perception of external threat increases; the more insecure the state feels, the more likely it is to use torture in order to control dissident behavior (1986, 24). States often deploy repression against violent opposition groups to signal that such behavior will not be tolerated. A state justifies its repressive tactics as legitimate because these tactics are directed against dissidents whose behavior is deemed dangerous and threatening to the wellbeing of the population (Devenport 1995, 78). Once the state implements repression to halt political instability, the state "becomes habituated into using" such mechanisms. The extent of repression implemented changes based on two factors: 1) different attributes of the conflict behavior encountered, and 2) the structure of the political economy (Davenport 1995, 684). States' repressive tactics are not uniform, but rather peculiar to the conflict context – i.e., based upon the state's experiences with domestic unrest. It is expected that political repression will neutralize political opponents, or at least increase the costs of dissent. Most of the literature draws upon casual linkages in which the costs of dissent become so large that it

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is no longer viewed as worthwhile goal by the political opponents (Gurr 1986; Kowalewski 1992).

The state establishes a repressive arm for the purpose of "war making, extraction, or state building." In order to understand the use of repression by the state, one ought to understand the available mechanisms of "resistance;" without resistance from the populace or rival elite, there is no obstacle in the path of the state (Krain 2000, 14). In the absence of viable opposition forces, or prospects for "anti-status quo," the politics are monopolized by a single hegemonic power (Del Aguila 1984, 139). States are ruled by rational elites who deploy necessary means to acquire desirable outcomes. The elite may engage in eliminating or neutralizing their rivals, ensuring protection for their supporters, and engage in extraction of resources. States whose elites face no accountability become "predatory" because they hold a monopoly of legitimate use of power that could be directed for extraction of resources from the populace (Levi 1981). In either case, resources are needed for the purpose of cooptation or repression; those who are in support of the incumbent elites are rewarded, while the challengers are punished. Repression is useful because it increases the costs for opposition to challenge the state (Krain 2000, 17). The repression capabilities of a state are strongest in a post-conflict environment; therefore, states are likely to apply such capabilities. Accommodation, even though a viable capability of a state, would be perceived as more costly. Elites that feel unthreatened by the existing challengers tend to survive without the need for appeasement or accommodation. These elites feel that they do not require the support of

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the opposition groups in order to remain in power. Hence, those elites that feel secure or invulnerable are most likely to use the repressive mechanisms (Krain 2000, 19).

The population, although dissatisfied with the oppressive state, will refrain from openly confronting the state because such confrontation against the incumbent regime would incur high risks. These risks are associated with various "opportunity costs" that each individual would have to bear – e.g., wages, time, repression, imprisonment, or death. Ideology will not be enough to convince individuals to join the rebellion; selective incentives have to be granted in order to encourage greater participation. Selective incentives – e.g. payments to compensate for economic hardship, power, or future promise of better inclusivity in the new system if the movement was successful – may be used to push citizens to participate. Due to the existence of competition among regime supporters and dissidents, each actor could offer more compelling incentives for collective action; e.g., the regime could issue payments to counter the offer made by the dissident group (Lichbach 1994). Dissidents of the regime ought to have access to resources for recruitment of individuals; they should be able to pay for the risks incurred by the participants. Hence, the use of repression by the state prevents opposition groups from mobilizing their resources effectively against the state. Repression increases the costs of collective action for each individual participant.

On the contrary, scholars argue that there is a "paradox" – excessive or indiscriminate use of repression by the state pushes previously neutral individuals to mobilize or participate in social movement against the state. Gurr and Duvall found that coercive tactics lead to political instability by breeding civil conflict (1986; 106). A

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repressive environment increases collective action spirit by "overcoming social cleavages, strengthening collective identity and rearranging groups into unitary whole" (Krain 2000, 107). Others have found that the level of state repression matters; for instance, a high level of repression increases violent mobilization but decreases non-violent mobilization (Krain 2000, 107). On the other hand, if a state decides instead to accommodate opposition groups then this could signal state's vulnerability, which could push previously unengaged opponents to mobilize (Krain 2000,109). Therefore, political repression is specific to challenges and threats posed by the individuals prior to administering repression, and the state's analysis of whether benefits obtained from such measures overweigh the costs. Due to the costs of repression, the state may instead engage in selective violence, targeting particular dissidents that the state deems most threatening (Boudreau 2004, 23). States uncertain of the capacity of the opposition groups would likely identify and target the most dangerous opponents, i.e. the opposition elites (McCormick 1988). Nonetheless, political opponents develop new mechanisms for adaptation, creating alternate ways to channel organization against the state (Fatton 1991). At certain times political defectors and the frustrated populace may cooperate and unite their efforts against the incumbent regime (Boudreau 2004, 26). Political opportunists evaluate the cost of rebellion; state weakness increases the chance for rebellion to be successful. Thus different forms of repression "promote specific logic of opportunity" (Bourdeau 2004, 29). For instance, Bourdeau argued in his cross-country analysis of state repression among three case studies (Burma, Indonesia and Philippines) that activists adapt their collective action against the state by acknowledging limits to

their activities, i.e., the amount of rebellion the state will tolerate before resorting to violence. In the case of the Philippines, the government tolerated legal protests from the opposition groups (2004, 161). Meanwhile, in Burma and Indonesia, state use of violence pushed some regime dissidents to seek alliance with the incumbent government for the sake of protection and survival (Bourdeau 2004, 248).

In sum, the authoritarian state implements repressive mechanisms to curb citizens' civil and political freedoms. The state perceives citizens' political participation as a threat to the regime's legitimacy. Therefore, in a repressive regime, citizens submit in fear because open confrontation with the state may lead to harassment and detention. In such societies, citizens are banned from expressing political views that do not conform to the repressive state's ideology. Political dissidents are punished or neutralized by the state, which further enforces paranoia or fear among the population who are pushed away from participation in social and rebellious movements.

Political Participation

Political participation is defined as legal activities instituted by the citizens in order to exert pressure and influence governmental personnel to take particular actions or to adopt particular policies that citizens deem favorable (Nie and Verba 1975, 1). Political participation is the direct or indirect methods that citizens use to convey preference, need, or concern to political actors, and they do so voluntarily (Nie and Verba 1975, 1). Other scholars have proposed a broader definition of political participation, terming it as 'an umbrella concept' that should incorporate activities directed towards both political figures and non-political figures who could exert influence. Political

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participation is categorized as those activities that use non-violent means to exert influence upon governmental officials; other activities such as riots or assassinations are considered illegal means of political participation. Nevertheless, political participation is contingent upon political culture, which in turn is dependent upon the type of political system. For instance, what may be considered permissible aspects of political participation in democracies could be deemed as conspiracy or sedition in authoritarian systems (Nie andVerba 1975, 3). The current literature examines citizens' political participation only within the realm of democratic regimes. The literature holds that only citizens belonging to countries that are democracies could exert influence upon political actors through political participation (Albrecht 2008, 15). However, such focus is too narrow because citizens of authoritarian governments, too, are able to participate politically. Political participation and political activism exist in every political system (Albrecht 2008, 15). Most citizens are unable to evaluate the actual consequences of their actions; some may even "damage their own best long-run interests by ill-conceived short-range demands" (Lippmann 1965). Nonetheless, citizens can influence their governments to adopt certain policies: they can either communicate their preferences through information, or they can exert pressure upon political leaders (Nie and Verba 1975, 7). Because individuals need to commit time and resources for political participation, participation incurs costs. Voting is regarded as the least expensive method of political participation for citizens, yet such a measure may be deceiving (Nie and Verba 1975, 2). For example, studies across Egypt and Jordan showed that voters were lured to the polls to cast their votes for an electoral candidate who had promised certain services and

provisions upon victory. Another study on Iran demonstrated that voters were forced to the polls to acquire a stamp on their identification cards without which they would be denied access to governmental or health services. High voter turnout in these countries was a manipulation (Lust-Okar 2008, 7).

In short, political participation is based upon those who take the initiative or opportunity to influence the current status quo. There is a thin line between political and non-political participation, which is often diffused. However, non-political activity could initiate or contribute to later political activity; e.g., enhancing skills through volunteering, establishing networks of contacts, or exposing oneself to different political views. Political activities are those that require citizens' commitment – for example, working for electoral campaigns, contacting government officials, protesting, participating in a boycott, or making donations (Verba, Schlozhan, and Brady 1995). Similarly, boycotting a certain type of product, which is very common in Europe, or wearing a badge with a political message could be an example of citizens' political participation (Teorell, Torcal, and Moniero 2007). Non-violent protests are another example of political participation, yet on average only a small number of people engage in these activities, although they communicate a message to governmental officials "loudly and clearly" (Nie and Verba 1975, 27).

Political participation should not be limited to public figures or political officials; rather, it should include all private citizens who have the capacity to exert influence. This is especially relevant to the political context of the Middle East (Albrecht 2008, 23). Among the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, informal institutions such as

local grassroots organizations and Islamist groups exert influences upon the political realm. Islamist groups are extremely powerful, as they not only exert pressure but also channel citizens' participation through mobilization. Islamist groups often operate as "shadow states" offering services ranging from charitable, educational, social and cultural tasks to their members (Albrecht 2008, 23). For instance, in Egypt, despite the initial governmental ban against the Islamic activities of the Muslim Brotherhood, there still exists a strong Islamic sector that operates politically in parallel with the Egyptian government. The sector includes private mosques, Islamic private schools, businesses, and volunteer associations that together support the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood (Blaydes and El Tarouty 2009, 364). Another example of an informal institution is *diwaniyya,* which carves space for adult men to engage in political participation through an informal gathering. Such indigenous institutions have been transformed into modern informal assemblies in many Gulf countries (Alhamad 2008, 44). Likewise, in Bahrain people gather in private homes called *majlis* in order to foster political discussions and address certain grievances of the constituency (Niethammer 2008, 149). Hence, the availability and coexistence of informal and formal institutions affects political process and leads to political consequences (Zerhouni 2008, 126).

There are numerous studies conducted by scholars to evaluate the effect of different forms of political participation across countries. For example, a group of scholars conducted a cross-cultural study and found that boycotting products is the most common type of political participation among the Scandinavian countries (Teorell, Torcal, and Moniero 2007). Scholars in the literature also found that in the United States

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direct means of political participation such as voting are in decline because more Americans prefer to express their political participation in the form of financial contributions. Furthermore, technological innovation has brought about new dimensions for political participation; i.e., citizens are able to use unconventional mechanisms in order to influence electoral outcomes (Guillion 2009). The emergence of the Internet has created new opportunities for political engagement (Baumgartner and Morris 2010), as it provides citizens with other means of political activism such as signing petitions, contacting politicians, or following political parties on social media networks (McAdam and Tarrow 2010). Online political participation empowers youth who often feel disengaged from offline (i.e. conventional) means of political participation (Oser 2013). It further lowers the costs of gathering information about political parties, and of communicating information to public (Tolbert and McNeal 2003). The availability and the use of the Internet improves the technical skills of the participants and mobilizes previously disengaged citizens (Kruger 2002). For instance, authoritarian regimes of the Arab world limit public spaces for citizens, thus indirectly inhibiting citizen's political participation. Many citizens therefore resort to alternate channels to express their willingness for and commitment to political activism, such as underground informal networks or participation via the Internet. Internet blogging has become very popular especially among the Gulf countries due to restrictions imposed on freedom of the press and the widespread fear of repression. In addition, Internet blogging has become popularized among Islamic clerics; for instance, in Bahrain Shiite villages run their own news and religious blogs. Internet activism across Arab states is widespread, despite the

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fact that the secret services monitor Internet activity for signs of defamation of the government (Niethammer 2008, 147).

Therefore, the only channel that is available for Arab citizens to exert influence upon the political elites is via this unconventional political participation, which is becoming more prevalent today. The Internet provides space for citizens of authoritarian states to express their political dissatisfaction more explicitly (Sakr 2004, 142). For instance, the Internet becomes a virtual arena for public debate, information sharing, and shaming of the political elites. The Internet also generates gender equality, as both men and women can openly voice their concerns through engagement in online debates (Oser 2013). For example, the Internet provides information to women about women's rights in other countries, and grants connections to global organizations whose advocacy is in line with women's rights (Sakr 2004, 144). In short, the Internet provides a channel for the Arab citizens to publically express their views and criticize the elites for certain policies without risking state sponsored backlash. However, authoritarian states impose greater restrictions upon citizens' use of the Internet to limit political activity. For example, in 2014 Qatar passed a cybercrime law that imposed greater control over the published content across social media and websites. The law bans the spreading of information that may depict "false news" or undermine the "general social order" in the state, and violators may face up to three years of imprisonment (Freedom House 2015). Such laws further inhibit citizens' willingness to participate politically because there is always a risk of imprisonment, and a rational individual would not dare to jeopardize his/her freedom.

In sum, political participation is a broad concept that incorporates different forms of participation by which citizens can exert influence upon the political elites. Citizens' political participation is important because it creates a culture of accountability – dissatisfied citizens may express their concern for a policy that they deem unfavorable. Although political participation exists in every political system, the extent to which citizens are able to influence political actors varies across different political systems. In the Arab world, citizens are more constrained in political participation due to strict authoritarianism that curbs political activism. Yet Arab citizens have discovered a niche with the establishment of the Internet, one that permits both Arab women and men to engage in political debate and express their political dissatisfaction.

Women's Political Participation

Women's political participation is broadly defined as the extent to which women are represented in, participate in, and exert influence in political decision-making. The definition also encompasses women's mobilization and participation efforts through civil society movements (Falch 2010). Participation in civil society movements allows women to exert influence and pressure political actors to adopt a favorable policy that would enhance women's equality and rights in the country. The current literature indicates several ways in which women could voice their concerns politically, including electoral suffrage and women's parliamentary quotas. Political representation through women's quota systems is a modern phenomenon, which became prominent only in the middle of the twentieth century. Notably, women's electoral suffrage was evident from as early as the nineteenth century. At first, women were excluded from political rights based on

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assumption that they were incapable of independent action in the field of politics (Prezworski 2009). Nonetheless, studies show that increasing women's political participation leads the way to democratic transition (Baldez 2003; Baker 2014; Paxton et al. 2010). The process of deliberation is inherited through democratization, as it ensures the bargaining process between actors driven by their self-interest. In making decisions, actors initially take into account the interests of others as democratic framework presumes accountability to the rest of the society, especially in regards to actors' positions and actions (Barnett and Zuercher 2009). Ruling elites often tend to camouflage their personal interests when initiating certain policies, but due to substantial societal and international pressure, the elite feels compelled to consider alternative interests. Hence, the extension of women's political rights revolves around the elite's decisions, especially at times of immanent threat of political revolt posed by the excluded (Prezworski 2009). For instance, the elite extends rights to women out of loss of political legitimacy or when women pose a credible threat to the ruling elite. As seen in Chile and South Africa, to divert power from the incumbent regime the opposition elite supported women's autonomous organizations in order to pull their votes, and in addition they lobbied women into political positions (Molyneux 1998). The elite prefers to bear these costs in order to avoid the possibility of revolution. Hence, as argued earlier, women's political participation becomes permissible when implemented by the incumbent elite.

Women's political participation in a society matters globally because women make up about half of the population of the majority of countries. Through representation women are granted a voice, which enables them to implement and promote policies that

would advance women's political interest and rights nationally. Political representation for women is often established through quotas, in which women must make up a certain percentage or number in the political system (The implementation of quotas, 2005, 164). The driving force behind the implementation of quotas is to promote women's inclusion in the decision-making process. One type of quota, which is often implemented by authoritarian regimes, is the reserved seat; reserved seats for women are enlisted by the constitution or legislation. Today more countries that had previously excluded women from politics implement "quotas as a fast track" for initiation of democratic façade (The implementation of quotas, 2005, 164). More often, authoritarian regimes implement quotas to mimic a democratic reform. For example, the former King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia personally appointed thirty women, about 20 percent, in the Shura Council. The Council is an advisory body that closely resembles parliaments, and in total there are 150 members in the council (Henderson and Jeydal, 2007 32). However, such a quota does not necessarily lead to a change in political outcomes, as women still remain a voiceless minority in the male dominated political arena.

The literature in regards to women's quotas is divided into two camps: those who argue that quotas are effective, and those who disagree. Overall the literature highlights a positive trend between the increase in women's political participation through quota systems and the democratic system of governance (Gray 2003; Yoon 2001; Baldez 2003; Baker 2014; Paxton et al. 2010). Many women activists in the Gulf countries advocate and press their government to adopt women's quotas across governmental agencies. Meanwhile, scholars also have indicated that simply introducing women's quotas does

not signify a country's commitment to gender equality or to democracy. Hence, quota systems do not halt the problems with democratic deficiency. For instance, a case study on Sudan's implementation of a threshold of 25 percent of women's quotas provides evidence that in the absence of institutional reform, i.e. an independent parliament from the executive branch, feminists are unable to raise their concerns (Tonnessen 2011).

Similarly, a comparative study on women's quotas across Chile and Argentina confirmed that women's quotas increased political representation, but the study disconfirmed that women actually had an influence in promoting or advancing women's political interests nationally. In addition, the study argued that the effectiveness of women's quotas depends upon a number of influencing factors such as the type of electoral system – proportional or majoritarian – the number of districts, and types of parties. Argentina implemented quotas at the national level with a ceiling of 30 percent threshold, whereas in Chile political parties independently grant women some representation (Gray 2003). Thus the scholarly literature has advanced the perception that proportional representative (PR) electoral systems are better in representing women than the majoritarian systems. This is due to the fact that PR tends to have a greater district magnitude, thus increasing chances for women's inclusivity when the total number of memberships per district increase (Jalalzai 2010). Another study comparing women's political representation argued that political stability and the backing of a male political elite allowed the successful implementation of women's quotas in Samoa but not in Papua New Guinea (Baker 2014). Nonetheless, the most comprehensive cross-sectional study was carried out by Paxton et al. (2010). In this study, the growth of women's

political representation was examined across 110 countries between the time periods of 1975 to 2000. They predicted that growth in democracy would always increase women's political representation with time. Instead, they found that the presence of gender quotas in a country does not necessitate an increase in women's political representation. Finally, in the last measure of the electoral system, mainly proportional representation proved that it had no effect on growth.

Furthermore, literature suggests that three factors lead to women's mobilization: organizational networks, connection with international feminism, and exclusion from the political arena. Conversely, if governments are responsive and allow some political rights to women, then women become reluctant to mobilize themselves against their governments (Baldez 2003). Research on Latin America showed that women's mobilization is a significant requisite in overthrowing the authoritarian regime during the transitional period (Waylen 2007). However, in the aftermath of transition both in Chile and Brazil, women's political representation was stagnant despite their initial efforts (Alvarez 1990). The factor that could increase women's participation actually contributes to authoritarianism: this entails incumbent elites that advance women's political participation through quotas in order to remain in power unchallenged. The incumbent elite implements women's quotas as a cosmetic democratic reform that does not improve the quality of democracy in the country. Women's quotas are minimal in scope, and further reinforce democratic deficit because they represent a limited number of women from the top of the social hierarchy such as women from elitist backgrounds with status and nepotistic linkages.

Recently, more authoritarian governments of the Middle East have been willing to incorporate women into traditionally male dominant politics, mainly through the introduction of quota systems. As evidence from the literature showed, women's quotas carve out a limited space in the political environment, but in reality women do not inhibit actual power and remain a voiceless minority. Women candidates who acquire emancipation through quota systems are usually drawn out of urban cities, and these women are often well educated and have social ties to the ruling male officials. At times of political opportunity, elite women tend to abandon women's organizations for a membership in the parliament and the state. Thus elite women are no longer able to represent the vast interests of women's movements. In addition, as part of the political apparatus, elite women lose their autonomy and capacity to criticize governmental policies that reinforce gender biases (Matear 1999). Similarly, when acquiring representation in the national parliament women might foster clientelisms such as seeking assistance from the incumbent elite in order to lobby for a position. For instance, the Saudi Arabian political sphere is organized through clientelistic linkages with a high level of nepotism as some female candidates have obtained seats through *wasta* (personal connections). In reality, countries of the world barely qualify for meeting the threshold of women's quotas of 30 percent. Rwanda is perhaps the only rare case that had exceeded the minimum threshold in 2013 by increasing women's quotas to about 61 percent. Hence, Rwanda is an outlier because the high political participation of women was the consequence of the civil war; the male population has been reduced.

Regardless, when women are barred from their civic rights, they often become victims of the state's discriminatory policies that reinforce patriarchal social norms. Such norms limit women's ability to stand up for themselves, discouraging them from speaking up in order to claim their natural civic rights. In Saudi Arabia, there are social norms that encourage women to pursue early marriages at the expense of education or professional careers. Generally, some conservative Saudi Arabian families distinguish only two roles for women (being a mother and a wife), subjecting them to "natural" responsibilities (Kangas, Haider, and Fraser 2014, 8.). Likewise, the legal and judicial systems play an important role in the society as they enforce laws and regulate people's access to resources, status, and basic civic rights. Legal enforcement systems in Saudi Arabia are dominated by conservative men who are apathetic to women, thus the system often fails to defend or even recognize the basic rights of Saudi Arabian women. Meanwhile, due to the subordinated positions of women within the patriarchal society, women have limited access to national legal systems. Because of structural inequalities and gender biases, they face discriminatory policies in regards to property entitlement and family law. Saudi Arabian judges often frown upon women reporting sensitive issues such as domestic violence and abuse. The majority holds that such matters ought to be kept private (Kangas, Haider, and Fraser 2014, 23). In Islamic jurisprudence women are expected to be obedient to their husbands, thus when a woman defies these duties there is legal justification for abuse such as beating (Tonnessen 2016, 15). Similarly, laws in the case of divorce are gender biased, as women can claim only if there is a valid reason to seek divorce (Kangas, Haider, and Fraser 2014, 67). Under certain circumstances divorce

serves as the last resort to marital problems. In the view of Saudi Arabian judges, divorce is the "prerogative of men," i.e., women do not hold an absolute right to claim divorce. The justification is based on the perception that women are more emotional and tend to lose their tempers quickly, which could trigger them to seek divorce, undermining the stability of a marriage. However, women are permitted to initiate divorce in a few situations, such as due to a husband's impotence (Al-Rasheed 2013, 129).

In such societies, women ought to be politically active. The presence of women in political institutions is crucial, as only through having a voice can women break through subordination by advancing policies that enforce equality and women's rights. Political decisions directly affect the lives of women. For quite a long time women's issues have been rarely addressed, ignored, or forgotten; therefore it is important to incorporate women in the political apparatus. Scholars have proposed that when women are elected into political office, they are more likely to advance women's issues and address women's concerns, especially those related to health care, security, education and welfare (Henderson and Jaydal 2007, 7-8). Nevertheless, while some countries in the GCC have made considerable progress towards women's political equality, others have not. In Saudi Arabia the progress towards women's political equality was initiated by the general consensus among the masculine elites within the monarchy. Hence, political participation remains a non-exclusive aspect of democratic regimes; it can evolve somewhat in the authoritarian regimes as well.

In sum, women's political participation entails women's access to the political realm via the electoral suffrage or quota. Access to the political decision-making process

grants women the ability to produce a favorable change that could enhance women's equality and rights, ending discriminatory policies and improving women's overall position in the society. Hence it is important that women are included within the political realm. However, women's political participation globally remains slow, and the extent of such participation varies across different political systems. Authoritarian states of the Arab world, through the initiation of the political elite, grant women political space, but this often implies limitations – in reality, women hold no actual power and remain voiceless.

Conclusion and Questions

Overall we learned from the literature on political participation that this concept is a broad concept that incorporates both direct and indirect means of participation by which citizens can influence political actors. We also know that citizens' political participation varies across different political systems; in democracies, political participation is more open and direct, while in authoritarian systems, political participation is limited and indirect. Hence, political participation is not only conducive to democracies, and does occur within the realm of authoritarian regimes although its expression is limited. There are two ways in which political participation is expressed under the framework of authoritarian regimes: through initiation by the government, and through the citizens' use of unconventional means of participation. The latter presumes that citizens can use the Internet to channel their dissatisfaction and exert pressure upon the political elites, while the former option holds that political participation is made available through the elite's initiation.

Authoritarian leaders may introduce democratic reforms, one of which is granting women an active role in the realm of politics and governance. However, does this mean, for example, that seventeen Saudi Arabian women admitted as councilors into the Municipal Councils will promote gender equality or voice women's concerns? Or will they fear to openly confront the government and their male counterparts who support discriminatory polices against women? Perhaps even if elected, Saudi Arabian women councilors would be committed to women's rights and willing to foster policies that would enhance gender equality, but their initiatives may simply be ignored by the male councilors. Similarly, citizens' political participation via the Internet might generate awareness, but the impact of such participation is also limited. For instance, citizens could criticize the authoritarian government on social media, but shaming does not lead to democratization, especially when authoritarian regimes are not accountable. Moreover, authoritarian states may impose restrictions on the use of the Internet through the cybercrime law. Hence, while political participation may thrive within the framework of authoritarian systems like the sultanistic regimes, it may not guarantee or contribute to democratization because citizens' political and civil freedoms remain restricted.

Authoritarian regimes use political repression to inhibit citizens' political participation, undermining civil and political liberties because granting freedoms to citizens could lead to political instability and disunity. In sultanistic regimes, social contract between the incumbent and the populace is almost nonexistent; when citizens demand political freedoms the regime responds with political repression, using a mechanism of coercion to halt citizens' attempts at political participation. For example,

perhaps Saudi Arabian women were given just enough space in the 2015 Municipal Councils to keep them quiet. This was done in order to prevent women from undermining the legitimacy of the regime. Perhaps if the government of Saudi Arabia had not extended political suffrage to women in 2015, then it would have incurred higher costs from Saudi Arabian women's unconventional activities. Thus, to curb women's activism, the government appeases women by allowing them to participate openly in order to maintain control over their activities. Maintenance of control is only possible through direct surveillance by the secret police, which remains a significant tool of authoritarian states. Through surveillance, authoritarian regimes may check citizens' activities, ensuring that these activities are not threatening to the internal order.

What we do not know is how political repression may impact women's political participation in Saudi Arabia. The literature showed that authoritarian regimes often grant concessions to some groups in the society because the threat from these groups is perceived as minimal. For example, most of the Arab authoritarian regimes often perceive women as least threatening, and therefore instigated concessions by granting women the right to political participation. Once women acquire space in the political realm, they may face obstacles that would prevent them from advancing women's issues and rights, and in addition their activities may be strictly monitored under the direct control of the authoritarian government. By appointing women to key positions, the government portrays its stance as being pro-women, which facilitates international legitimacy.

As seen from the Municipal Council Elections in 2015, a lot of pro-women's rights candidates were not admitted to stand for election. Women candidates were meticulously checked and selected, and the candidates who were involved in some sort of pro-human rights advocacy were dropped from the lists. Thus the government often appoints "safe" candidates who are tied to the ruling royal members, and in this way women just become a reflection of the government. Is granting political participation to women in Saudi Arabia just another means of the state's repressive control, i.e., elimination of potential defectors? Does the Kingdom's concession to women give a sign of hope that the grievances of other social cleavages will be taken care of? Do women remain a voiceless minority with no power capacities to influence the decision-making process? To determine this, I decided to investigate the opinions and perspectives of Saudi Arabian women to get a sense of their freedom in expressing their views, and their attitudes about Saudi Arabia's stance in regards to women's political participation.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

I sought to investigate whether the recent 2015 elections, a political opening for Saudi Arabian women, initiated a positive impact and improved women's social status in the Kingdom. Ideally, information could be gathered from country specific public records or through a survey method. However, I was focused more on personal perspectives from Saudi Arabian women themselves to get a sense of whether the elections affected their sense of a greater freedom.

The information from public records, if readily available, would be comprehensive, incorporating statistics regarding the number of women (names, dates, background) holding political positions and standing in elections. Other public information would incorporate details on the level of women's political participation in the elections per district or a municipality. Unfortunately, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia does not update or make its records accessible, and those limited records that are available are not accessible to the public. Likewise, the survey method, which involves administering interviews with Saudi Arabian women to inquire about their views and attitudes toward the level of women's political participation in Saudi Arabia, implies limitations.

The survey method is preferable in many ways because a researcher can gain access to information that is not publically available, i.e., the attitudes of women in Saudi Arabian society. However, one major drawback is the recruitment of participants who are

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willing to be open, honest, and unrestricted. Based on the reasons mentioned above, I adopted a personal approach – I wanted to interview Saudi Arabian women activists to ask them questions about this new political opening. I thought that personal interviews were more intimate because they facilitate social trust. If my interviewees felt that they could trust me, then they would be more honest and willing to share personal stories and experiences that would capture their sense of political participation in Saudi Arabia. This personal interview approach is discussed in more detail in the following sections of this chapter.

Option One: Public Records

The extent to which Saudi Arabian women's participation in politics has evolved over time could be addressed by using public records. The analysis could compare, for example, the level of women's employment such as the number of women holding legal, administrative, police, and other government positions. To evaluate women's security in the state, one could look at whether Saudi Arabia is signatory to international treaties that protect women's rights such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Similarly, one could evaluate the constitutional law – for instance, whether Saudi Arabia created legal barriers like age, marital status, or tribal affiliation that could prevent women from voting or being elected. Analysis of recent amendments to the law could provide more information in regards to the status of women; for instance, whether women have access to courts. Looking at women's grassroots organizations in the country while also assessing their sources of funding could also be useful in acquiring more information. This information was

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gathered through secondary sources like local and international newspapers, journal articles, scholarly publications, and country specific reports published by the international agencies (United Nations Women, Women Stats, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance). Overall, I was able to find few reports on the subject of women's participation across economic, political, and social sectors, but this information has not been updated since 2011. Many United Nations (UN) rapporteurs and working groups have been monitoring and pressing the Saudi Arabian government to improve its human rights practices. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is signatory to CEDAW as of 2000, and is required to submit regular reports that identify the improvements made by the government in relation to its signed treaties (Alhargan 2012, 131). Since Saudi Arabia ratified CEDAW, the Kingdom ought to report every year to the international commission on its achievements in bringing women's equality and rights. However, the government of Saudi Arabia does not keep updated records, and the last record was issued in 2008 (UN Women, CEDAW). Moreover, Saudi Arabia has not signed the Optional Protocol of CEDAW, which enables citizens to bypass the national courts and seek redress by submitting individual petitions directly to the UN for adjudication. Such international legality permits citizens to hold their governments accountable in the case of violations (Smith-Cannoy 2012, 17). Upon ratification of CEDAW or any other treaty, Saudi Arabia submits a reservation that reads: "In the case of contradiction between any term of the Convention and the norms of Islamic law, the Kingdom is not under obligation to observe the contradictory terms of the Convention." Thus, the national courts of Saudi Arabia overrule the international obligation. When the Kingdom of Saudi

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Arabia signs a particular international treaty, it further fails to comply with this ratified international norm. In the absence of independent non-governmental organizations and international organizations that could oversee implementation, noncompliance becomes a relatively low cost for Saudi Arabia (Smith-Cannoy 2012, 25). For instance, human rights violations are only reported through Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch as a strategy for shaming the government for its violations. There exists a long list of UN treaties and conventions that Saudi Arabia has not signed. The underlying bases of these unsigned treaties involve protection of individual freedoms, and these range from women's rights (CEDAW being the exception), the international bill of human rights, protection of minority rights, slavery, protection from torture, protection from discrimination, and freedom of association (Ratification of International Human Rights Treaties: Saudi Kingdom 2016). In my struggle to find available public records on the topic of women's political participation, this information was beyond my reach. For example, when looking at the policies and recommendations submitted by the UN international rapporteurs on the treaty of CEDAW for the years that it was available, I realized that the government of Saudi Arabia adopted a reoccurring tendency for differing recommendations; i.e., they would continuously ignore the recommendations made by the UN rapporteurs. Also, when searching for information such as aspects of women's security, land ownership, and property rights, I found that this information also remained unreported by the Saudi Arabian government. Meanwhile, in regards to the 2015 elections, the international journalists only covered women's political participation on the

surface; details including the names, professions, and backgrounds of Saudi Arabian women competing in the elections were left unreported.

Option Two: Survey Method

An alternative approach to analyze whether an increase in the political participation of women created greater political space for women in Saudi Arabia could be established by conducting in-depth interviews with Saudi Arabian women who are active in promoting and advocating for women's equality and rights in the Kingdom. These women activists, for example, could shed light into the inner workings of the Municipal Council Elections, and provide invaluable information in regards to both opportunities and impediments faced by women activists. Hence, survey research is one of the most effective options for gathering information about the attitudes, behaviors, and interests of a particular society. However, the quality of the survey method depends upon the cumulative result of many participants, and when the researcher fails to obtain a full list of participants the "inferential value" of the method decreases. Nevertheless, the quality of the survey method can be improved substantially because it is contingent upon two factors, which are contacting and participation. To illustrate, one can increase the cooperation of participants through various means, such as sending invitation letters in advance, creating follow up reminders, producing interview scripts that are persuasive, and lastly, providing incentivizing payments (Groves, Cialdini, and Couper 1992, 476).

There exists a set of global characteristics that help researchers predict the level of cooperation from participants. For instance, the degree of political trust towards a political system and its institutions felt by a particular individual may impact the level of

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cooperation. Similarly, if a society is continuously subjected to surveying, this could decrease the level of cooperation due to exhaustion and disinterest (Groves, Cialdini, and Couper 1992, 477). The experience of the researcher may further inhibit the level of cooperation; skilled and confident interviewers are more likely to achieve high levels of participation. Moreover, the psychological factors of participants play an important role since they may determine whether the participants will be willing to cooperate. Social validation also encourages participation; for example, when respondents believe that others would comply with the research, they are more likely to comply with it themselves. Finally, compliance increases in the presence of an authoritative figure; people are more responsive to requests when they are approached by a higher authority, for instance, a professor rather than a student (Groves, Cialdini, and Couper 1992, 482). Most of the respondents prior to participation engage in cost and benefit analysis; this means evaluating whether participation would outweigh the individual costs. Some of the individual costs are the time required to answer the questions, the lost opportunity to perform other activities, and the cognitive burden of understanding the questions. On the other hand, benefits could entail being introduced to novel topics, enjoyment from participation, and a sense of altruism or individual contribution to social good (Groves and Couper 1998, 122).

Nonetheless, survey cooperation is decreasing due to an increase in the rate of refusals. This is of a great concern for researchers who aim to evaluate social attitudes in regards to a particular political, social, or economic context. Survey cooperation requires social trust, and the survey method implies interaction with strangers; i.e., an interviewer

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who has no pre-existing personal ties with the participant, a condition required for quality research to eliminate selection bias. However, individuals are then reluctant to speak openly about certain issues simply because they do not trust the interviewer (Dillman 2000, 19-21).

Research shows that "social trust" among citizens tends to be generally lower in countries that have experienced non-democratic governments for a long time (Stolle 2009, 13). Citizens who live in authoritarian regimes often do not trust their governments due to factors like embedded corruption, government incompetence, and lack of institutional accountability. In addition, authoritarian regimes often establish totalitarian control over the population, limiting citizens' political and social participation. When citizens decide to reveal information related to political culture in the country, they may face punishment. Hence, citizens living in such societies generally lack social trust towards the political system, and when approached for questioning they often prefer not to be involved in research that probes political issues. Individuals in repressive societies may feel comfortable discussing politics with family, friends or relatives – people with whom they share "intimacy, trust, respect, access and mutual regard" – because such emotional connection provides a safety net (Torcal and Maldonado 2014, 5). However, citizens themselves may refuse to cooperate with research that presents political questions, simply because they conform to government's political culture. Citizens subscribe to political norms, social traditions, and religions that reinforce certain political-economic contexts in the country. For instance, many Saudi Arabian nationals support and adhere to the Wahhabi ideology that prescribes gender roles and gender

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relations; they view such political culture as a part of their own identity, i.e., what makes them feel they are Saudi Arabian nationals. Hence, aspects of political repression and political culture were evident in my study. Initially, when I sought to interview Saudi Arabian women, a majority of them expressed an interest but later refused to engage or participate in the research. The general trend was that Saudi Arabian women were unwilling to cooperate in research that posed political questions either because they were afraid or because they were not interested.

Option Three: Personal Interviews

With these challenges in mind, how could I examine the level of Saudi Arabian women's political participation? Evaluating Saudi Arabian women's access to public office – whether they were able to influence the decision-making process and advocate for women's equality in the Kingdom – was my primary interest. My goal was to discuss with each woman questions related to segregation, personal life histories, and their opinions regarding women's political participation – whether they saw it as a first step towards a greater role for Saudi Arabian women in politics. I wanted to ask them a long-list of questions, and I designed about twenty-five questions. These questions were: How was it like growing up as a little girl in Saudi Arabia? Did you face gender discrimination? When you were young what were your aspirations - who did you want to become? In your day-to-day life, was "gender segregation" ever an issue? If you had a choice would you prefer coeducation? Explain your preference. In the past have you ever experience that simply being a woman was an obstacle in attaining a goal? Education is important for women's empowerment, yet educated Saudi Arabian women are unable to

secure jobs despite their skills and qualifications, in your opinion why would that be? What does women's rights mean to you as a Saudi Arabian woman? Do you feel you have power as a woman in your society e.g. physical, security, access to law, political power? Do you feel that gender segregation is repressive or is it necessary? Do you feel that not being able to drive is an impediment and would you consider it as a woman's right? Would your family accept you working in a mixed environment i.e. with male colleagues side by side? Do you think religious-cultural rhetoric reinforces patriarchy in your country? Is it an impediment for women's rights? Do you think that local non-governmental organizations bring about social change that is beneficial to women? Do you feel that the Arab Spring events in the Middle East had an impact upon Saudi Arabian women? Today, do you believe women in your society are more empowered in politics, economics, and social aspects than they were ten years ago? In your opinion what have fostered that change? Do you think women should be a part of political process in order to have the ability to voice issues and concerns related to women? How important is it for you to have women in the Municipal Councils? Do you think that a woman at the Municipal Council is able to promote a policy that may improve women's rights in the country? How? Did you vote at the 2015 national elections? Why not? When casting your vote did you favor women over men candidates? Explain your preference. What do you think prevents women from voting for female candidates? The media states that female candidates are unable to secure votes or are bad campaigners, what is your opinion on that? Would you agree with this statement, "allowing women to run for office

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would actually foster women's equality at the national level." What are your expectations for women's rights in the future?

Even though I really wished to ask all of these questions, I knew in practicality it might be difficult as these questions are sensitive and Saudi Arabian women may not feel comfortable answering them. For instance, some Saudi Arabian women political activists may not view gender segregation as an impediment to women's social status or rights. Saudi Arabian women may be supportive of the gender segregation policy because it could preserve a woman's honor and earn her respect – a characteristic that is highly valued in Saudi Arabian society. Mixing with unrelated men could damage a woman's reputation and could lead to social stigmatization. Therefore, later I revised my questions in order to neutralize the sensitivity of my study.

The first two options listed above were not feasible for my research inquiry. The first option, gathering information through public records, was not viable because the government curbs civil society organizations that could report about the political, economic and social state of affairs in the Kingdom. The Kingdom controls local organizations, press, and media to allow only the publication of information that the government sees as favorable. Meanwhile, the Saudi Arabian government itself refrains from publishing records related to political issues, as the government wants to prevent public access to this information in order to maintain internal stability and legitimacy. The second option, conducting interviews with Saudi Arabian women, would be the most effective strategy because I could learn more about women's political participation in the Kingdom. However, most of the Saudi Arabian women political activists I contacted

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refused to participate in my research study. I sensed that the government of Saudi Arabia frowns upon citizens' involvement in research that underlines sensitive political issues.

Perhaps some women I was in contact with wanted to share their views, experiences, and knowledge, but after evaluating the likely negative impacts, they refused to participate for security reasons, i.e., avoiding the risks associated with political repercussion. Initially, the responses I received from women depicted interest in participation – women expressed will and eagerness to answer the interview questions. I truly believed that the Saudi Arabian government made a first step for greater reform by granting Saudi Arabian women suffrage; I thought that this would eventually further empower women in the Kingdom. Following King's Fahd efforts, and King Abdullah's decree and public reporting on 2015 elections, there seemed to be a real opening for Saudi Arabian women's political participation; everyone seemed excited and was celebrating around the world in solidarity with Saudi Arabian women. I was eager to explore what political participation meant for Saudi Arabian women, and whether it had an impact upon women's lives. I thought that women would be proud to share their first experiences both as political voters and as candidates.

Perhaps my approach towards Saudi Arabian women was influenced by Western ideas. I was convinced that Saudi Arabian women would be open to my research inquiry even though my personal experience stated otherwise. I mistakenly perceived that Saudi Arabian women were now free to express their attitudes and views, since they had acquired greater political opening. In the past, Saudi Arabian women were vocal, openly challenging the clerics and the state, demanding rights and equality for women in the

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Kingdom. Numerous Saudi Arabian women activists had participated in Internet blogging and televised debates, raising concerns about the discrimination and marginalization of women in society. Over thousands of Saudi Arabian women have signed petitions to the King in an attempt to demand political change. If in the past Saudi Arabian women were not limited in their struggle towards women's equality and rights, I thought they would be willing to share their opinions now, because their overall efforts brought a feasible change, i.e., the right to vote and to stand in elections. However, in the course of my research investigation, political repression became an underlining factor that inhibited Saudi Arabian women's political participation and prevented them from participating in my research inquiry. Furthermore, I realized that the meaning of political participation is different for Saudi Arabian women than what Western theories have portrayed – for women under authoritarian repressive states, political participation entails a much slower process, in which political opening does not guarantee civil or political rights to citizens.

The research process I was involved in pushed me in a different direction, i.e., to investigate a relationship between political repression and women's political participation. I also discovered the underlying influence of political culture upon women's political participation. Political culture is a mechanism of political repression that inhibits women's aspirations for political participation in Saudi Arabian society. In order to make the case for the relationship, part of my analysis strategy would examine difficulties I encountered in my attempts to get information from women about politics. In the course of my research investigation, I witnessed political repression implemented

by the state through a dictation of political culture; this prevented Saudi Arabian women from political participation and from free speech. When subjected to continuous surveillance and coercion, citizens no longer trust their government even when the government creates limited political concessions, and for this reason they refrain from expressing their views and opinions. Similarly, when citizens are exposed to a particular political culture that advocates for authoritarianism and citizens' submission, then citizens no longer aspire for political power or participation. Even though in my research study I managed to gather only four interviews from Saudi Arabian women outlining their attitudes and opinions, I am certain that this was due to political repression that reinforces a specific political culture; I would have acquired greater cooperation in participation if Saudi Arabian women were actually free to express their political thoughts.

Research Intention

In order to conceptualize whether the women of Saudi Arabia have more political, economic, and social power, and to understand the status of women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia, I first intended to talk to thirty Saudi Arabian women activists by conducting semi-structured interviews to ask them about their opinions in regards to recent political opening and whether such opening enhanced women's rights and equality in the Kingdom. Hence, my research study was to be exploratory as it relied upon opinions and attitudes of Saudi Arabian women. I wanted to interview activists who advocate for women's equality and rights in the Kingdom, intending to recruit Saudi Arabian women residing in the United States of America and in the Kingdom of Saudi

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Arabia to participate. I planned to administer the interviews with Saudi Arabian women via the Apple application FaceTime, with each interview lasting 20 to 60 minutes at most. The pool of potential participants had to be educated Saudi Arabian women nationals, Muslims who were ethnically Arab. I hoped that interviewing Saudi Arabian women would expose their opinions, attitudes, dreams, and achievements in relation to their social position and quality of life, while their descriptions of personal experiences in the fields of education, work, and family would unveil their position in regards to women's rights in the Kingdom. I also intended to interview more senior Saudi Arabian women who were experienced and knowledgeable about the subject matter since they might be well informed about developments and changes that were taking place in the Kingdom across social, political, and economic aspects.

I revised my questions for the study and designed new ones limiting the number of questions and neutralizing the sensitivity of the topic. There were four questions in total, two inquiring about the educational background of the participant and her parents, followed by a hypothetical scenario to probe the participants' attitudes towards women's rights, and a fourth question designed to evaluate the participants' levels of support for women's advancement. These were the questions: What is your highest level of education, what degree? Where did you get that degree - in Saudi Arabia or Abroad? Which university? When did you get your degree? Why did you decide to study in Saudi Arabia or Abroad? And what about your Father: same questions as above. And what about your Mother: same question as above. I would like to know about how your family supports your political participation. Can you give an example of how your husband

supports your participation? Can you give an example of how your mother or father supports your participation? I would like you to imagine this scenario: A number of women decide to drive in your city to protest the driving ban. How likely are you to join them and drive a car? What factors would influence your decision (as above)? My husband would approve (disapprove)? My mother and father would approve (disapprove)? My other supporters would approve (disapprove)? Which of these three: husband, parents, others would be most important in your decision? It is sometimes suggested that women need the real support of men to get ahead in society. If they do not have it, their activities and political participation will be limited. Do you feel you have support for your political participation, that you feel safe and secure if you speak out in public or violate a norm of behavior on women? Where does your support come from? Do you have special connections that allow you to speak out?

Generally, when research involves a stigmatized group, it is unlikely that they will be willing to give answers to questions that they deem sensitive. To overcome such limitations I followed the method of a "chain referral" that was previously implemented by other scholars who were also inquiring about Saudi Arabian women. For instance, Mona AlMunajjed (1997, 22), a Saudi Arabian sociologist who had lived in the Kingdom for many years, experienced difficulties in finding other Saudi Arabian women to talk to. She initiated contacts by referring to her personal networks first, to acquire participants to ask questions. It was a general trend among Saudi Arabian women to be cautious in sharing or giving out information to researchers. Similarly, the French sociologist Amélie Le Renard (2014, 104) experienced similar difficulties. As a foreign woman, she was

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mistrusted and it took her a few weeks to establish good relationships with the Saudi Arabian women she interviewed. For instance, she encountered numerous obstacles, especially when she intended to visit a university campus in Saudi Arabia for potential respondents. When girls themselves wanted to be interviewed, university officials denied access to the researcher. Following the steps of previous researchers on the question of Saudi Arabian women, I too decided to adopt a chain referral method because the sensitivity of the research inquiry implied a limited subgroup of the population that could be located only through the means of chain referral.

Getting a Sample

In my approach to recruiting participants I implemented chain referral sampling, a method widely used in qualitative sociological research especially when a research topic deals with sensitive issues. The method provides a sample through referrals made among people who share similar characteristics; i.e., an insider locates other possible participants who are of interest for the research. The chain referral method entails a prolonged process in which a "researcher must actively and deliberately control the initiation, progress and termination" (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981, 143). The general complications encountered in the use of the chain referral method include starting the referral chains, verifying the eligibility of each participant, engaging respondents in recruitment of other potential participants, controlling for quality and the number of chains. The reason why I have implemented this method was to recruit Saudi Arabian women who were politically active in promoting women's rights in the Kingdom. Since I conducted my research in the Unites States and not in Saudi Arabia, I was limited in my access to Saudi Arabian

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women, and to find Saudi Arabian women to interview I had to ask individuals among my acquaintances for their contacts.

I initiated referral chains by asking students and faculty at the University of Denver, where I am a student, for possible contacts. I started with faculty whose fields of research and interest were in line with the Middle East. I contacted faculty members from the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, and some of them provided contacts who referred me to Saudi Arabian citizens. When I acquired a recommended referral, I directly contacted the person by sending them an introductory research brief via email communication. The brief stated:

I am delighted to be in contact with you. I am a second year student at the University of Denver working towards MA in International Studies. I am pursuing research question that explores women's political participation in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Research indicates that Saudi Arabian women becoming more active in promoting equality, security in the Kingdom and that woman are actively redefining and overcoming traditional boundaries. I am interested in learning what are these channels. I would like to know whether recent positive changes in regards to women's participation at the Municipal Council elections enhanced women's equality. To inquire answers for this question, I would like to administer a short interview with you. The interview would take about 20 to 30 minutes of your time and would be conducted through Skype or FaceTime, whichever you prefer. During the interview I will ask four general questions related to women's participation in the Kingdom. I am enthusiastic about this research because I believe Saudi Arabia with enactment of

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recent changes made a bold step towards women's future. I appreciate your interest

and your time. And I am happy to provide you more information as my thesis

proceeds.

I then waited for each participant to respond, giving her about three days to one week. If

they did not answer, I sent in the same message with a personal resume attached as a

reminder, ensuring that it was not lost in the junk folder. In the absence of a response

within the next two days, I sent a courtesy message that read:

> I have got your contact through... s/he said you were interested and willing to
>
> participate in the interview, for which I am very thankful. I hope you are doing well.
>
> Perhaps you are busy with your schedule. I just want to send you a check-in email and
>
> provide you with latest information in regards to my thesis on "Saudi Arabian
>
> women's political participation." Attached are interview questions and a consent form
>
> for your reference. Kindly, let me know if you are still interested in participation and if
>
> you have any questions, I would be happy to answer them. Thank you for your time
>
> and consideration, I really hope you can participate in my research study.

Then I waited for at least two to three days, and upon not receiving a reply, I followed up

for the last time with an email message that read:

> I hope you are well. I do apologies for my emails but please, let me know if you are
>
> still interested in this interview. It would not take more than 20 minutes of your time. I
>
> would really appreciate your feedback. I am attaching the interview questions and my
>
> resume for your kind reference. Respectfully awaiting a response.

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In the course of these follow-up email messages that were not answered, I subsequently engaged in finding new participants for the study by asking faculty and students at the university for referrals.

Professor A, an expert on Middle Eastern issues pointed out some valuable contacts for my research. I was referred to two women from Canada and London. The woman from London is a Saudi Arabian professor at the University of London who published a book in 2013 (*A Most Masculine State)* that addresses the woman question. I contacted her multiple times but never received a reply. On the contrary, the woman from Canada, a journalist experienced in Middle Eastern politics, immediately responded to my query. In her email message she said:

> Your project sounds interesting. I'm putting you in touch with our amazing friend, a Saudi celebrity (and a dynamic smart activist and public figure). You're lucky! Even though she's busy with her jet-setting lifestyle and full schedule she really knows some interesting Saudi women that she could put you in touch with and also some Saudi women in the States.

I followed up with this woman and she replied: "I am always just on the run and travelling perhaps, if you can send me an email on what is that you require I will see what I can do to help or introduce you to people who can help you." I sent her an introductory brief of my research; she liked it very much and forwarded it to six Saudi Arabian women contacts involved in politics, economics and women's advocacy in the Kingdom. In her email she mentioned: "Ladies, a friend needs to interview various women on the effect of

the municipalities for her MA thesis… would appreciate it if you can do it for her... and if you can also forward to others. I think she needs about 30 in total, please help her." Although she was very helpful in directing me to possible participants, she refused to participate in the research directly. When I approached her with the possibility, she explained that time was a constraint because she tends to travel a lot and has a very busy schedule. She also said that she would not be responsible if women whom she allegedly introduced me to do not respond. She said: "I can see what I can do but I am sure you understand also that my time is limited… so I really cannot follow up at all with who replied or did not. I am sure you are going to be also trying to find other Saudi women through other channels." I waited a week and then sent in an introductory brief in another email message once more, in order to follow up with the six Saudi Arabian women on her contact list. On January 23, 2016 I received just one response from a woman who is active in promoting women's participation in economics. I will mention my experience with her later.

Professor B, whose field is related to the Middle East, introduced me to a male Saudi Arabian doctoral student at the University of Denver whose dissertation was similar to my research interests. I followed up with him and we scheduled an informal coffee break meeting on January 17, 2016. He was surprised by my desire to research Saudi Arabian women's political participation. He said: "You are the first student I meet who is interested to write about Saudi Arabia but especially about Saudi women." He said that the ruling family of Saudi Arabia condemns political activism. The government is not interested in granting civil liberties to its citizens, because when citizens are under

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totalitarian control then the government feels safe, as there are no political challengers. He also mentioned that after the Arab Spring uprising in 2011, the government of Saudi Arabia increased its surveillance over the population especially in the Eastern Provinces, fearing uprising from the disenfranchised *Shi'a* population. Interestingly, he clarified that Saudi Arabia wants to be seen as a reformist government in the eyes of the West, however, the changes that the government is initiating are just a façade to cover the internal oppression Saudi Arabians face everyday. Furthermore, when the international media reports about Saudi Arabia in a negative light, the government immediately provides limited concessions to the public. For instance, members of the royalty continuously engage in some "democratic" activities – advocating for women's rights, creating awareness for breast cancer or domestic violence, and establishing charitable foundations through the country in order to show the world that everyone is taken care of, and that the ruled are satisfied. However, in reality this is just a cover story for the West. "Only Saudi Arabians know the real internal struggles and challenges they face daily," he said. He was also willing to introduce me to some women from his personal contacts in Saudi Arabia. He also said that he knows Saudi Arabian activists who would be open to a discussion on my research topic, if it remains confidential. He shared an email of four of his contacts; one of them was a famous Saudi Arabian activist who participated in the 2011 protests demanding political reforms. He also said that he would reach out to more contacts on my behalf. Unfortunately, the women I contacted via email did not respond.

Discovering Repression

Through my new acquaintance I was introduced to only one Saudi Arabian woman via Facebook on January 25, 2016 – a student at a U.S. University who was willing to talk to me. She was also willing to introduce my research to her own contacts. She said: "I find your research interesting and I will be pleased to participate in your research and answer your questions. I also have a lot of Saudi female friends all around the states. Do you want me to ask them for you? How many more Saudi women do you need?" I was glad to hear this and told her I needed as many as she could find. Through her I was referred to another Saudi Arabian woman via Facebook on the same day; my initial Facebook contact said, "I talked to one of my friend about your research and she's willing to answer your questions. This is her Facebook account. You can add her." Then on January 28, 2016 she reached out and said that there were about fifteen Saudi Arabian friends that she spoke to on my behalf who refused to disclose information or participate in my research directly. They preferred filling out an anonymous questionnaire instead of face-to-face Internet communication. She said: "Good news, I asked my friends who are also willing to participate in your research but they don't want to share their contacts. Do you mind if I send them your questions and then send you back their answers?"

I was hesitant to allow them to do so since a questionnaire implies limitations. For instance, through face-to face communication I could ask participants to be more elaborative in their responses, and I could also explain certain questions with the help of examples if participants failed to understand a question. Also, face-to-face interviews presume that respondents are more likely to exert cognitive thinking when answering the

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questions; for example, recollecting personal experiences in their memory that would justify their answers. Moreover, face-to-face communication establishes some level of trust; the interviewer could engage respondents more by sharing enthusiasm in the topic, thus facilitating commitment (Holbrook, Green, and Krosnick 2003, 82-83). I could not rely on the information completed by the respondents through a questionnaire simply because it would have been done without my oversight. The questionnaires would have to be distributed on my behalf by the student to her friends, so I would not be able to guarantee whether it would actually be done or not. I also would not have been able to verify the eligibility of respondents such as their age and whether they were familiar with the 2015 elections and women's rights. I would not be able to tell whether these Saudi Arabian friends were actually women. In addition, when a person unfamiliar with the process conducts research, even if it means just distributing the questionnaire, it may lead to research biases. The researcher needs to ensure that questions are answered properly, while the eligibility of each participant is verified. For example, some respondents themselves commit unethical behavior, such as providing dishonest answers (Kountur 2011, 57). When conducting interviews researchers can ask additional questions to distinguish truthful answers, such as asking the respondent to relate to a question with an example. Hence, if the Saudi Arabian woman I was in contact with distributed the questions on my behalf, from a research point of view it would be deemed unethical because the person was not involved in the design of the study. Hence, due to the reasons mentioned above, and to eliminate unnecessary selection biases, I decided to stay with my initial method – face to face interviews via the Internet.

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Professor C on February 2, 2016 introduced me to his former Saudi Arabian student who is currently a professor at one of the Universities in Saudi Arabia. In his message he wrote:

I have an interesting Uzbek student in class who is writing a thesis about gender empowerment in the KSA. She is looking for Saudi women who are involved in – or at least are knowledgeable of – the movement to ask questions about how they are going about this, what successes they have had, and what social cultural issues are involved. I realize that this is particularly sensitive area, but she insists that she can maintain confidentiality. She has explained and shown to me the various procedures she has instated to assure that confidentiality. Do you happen to know anyone willing to help? Do not do this if it puts you in political or cultural problems.

Consequently, I was introduced to five female students at that university. I however received responses from only two Master's candidates who were eager to be interviewed. Both students responded on February 7, 2016. One said:

Sorry for my late reply because I'm travelling in this month. I'm personally greatly interested in your research, and I'll be so glad to receive more information from you at anytime. And if it's ok with you, when you finish writing your questions can you send it to me so I can prepare myself for the interview!

Another student responded: "Sorry for the delay. I was busy with the mid term exams and papers and did not check my email. I am glad to help you on your thesis. Please feel free to send me your questions."

They requested me to send them a sample of my interview questions and so I did. By then I had my newly designed questions. However, I never had the chance to interview these two Saudi Arabian students as one of them stopped answering my emails, and the other sent me a short response explaining why she could not participate in the research. I have included her explanation later in the following sections.

Desperate to find participants, on February 15, 2016 I contacted Professor D, who works at the English Language Center at my university, as I expected that many Saudi Arabian students were enrolled in classes to learn English. The professor was able to touch base with previous students, introducing the research proposal on my behalf. One of the students expressed interest in participation, so I was introduced to her. My professor said, "I would like to introduce you to... The student I mentioned is willing to participate, so I will now step out and let both of you coordinate with each other! Good luck with your project." But this student never responded. I though maybe this student felt pressured to say that she was interested in the research and had simply lied to her professor. I will never know the true reasons. I then contacted three Saudi Arabian students from my previous English Language Competence class via Canvas, but my efforts failed as these students too did not respond to my email messages.

On February 21, 2016 I further followed up with the Saudi Student Association Group at the University of Denver. There are about thirty-five students in this group. I met with two Saudi Arabian men, the president and the vice president of the association, and asked them if they knew any Saudi Arabian female students and if they were part of the student organization. One mentioned that there were five female Saudi Arabian

students in the group, and that he would pass my contact information on to them. I never heard back from them. I then reached out to seven Saudi Arabian women acquaintances in the UAE, most of whom I knew personally as they were my classmates at the American University of Sharjah. Some of these women remained in the UAE while the majority traveled back to Saudi Arabia. Generally, the result was predictable: most of the women ignored my request, and one women said she would rather not engage in the interview as she had "no time," but said she would ask around to find others who might be willing. I realized that no one was really willing to participate.

Similarly, on February 26, 2016, I contacted officers working at the International House for International Student & Scholar Services (ISSS); they were supposed to forward my introductory email to all Saudi Arabian students at the University of Denver. Although I do not know the exact number of Saudi Arabian students enrolled in the university for the year 2016, I do know that among the international students, enrollment by Saudi Arabians is second highest after Chinese students. However, I was not contacted by any of the Saudi Arabian students at the university.

Moreover, I attended two conferences in the winter of 2016 in order to contact more participants to inquire about Saudi Arabian women activists. The two conferences were on "Extremism and Islamophobia in Perspective: Understanding ISIS Appeal" and "Gender, Peace and Security: What's Next?" both held at the University of Denver. I had a chance to speak with the keynote speaker, a lawyer with expertise in international human rights and gender issues. I introduced myself and briefly explained the purpose of my research; she expressed overwhelming interest and was willing to share my proposal

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with some of her professional contacts. I sent her an introductory brief, and on February 13, 2016 she responded: "Deep apologies for the delay in getting back to you. I've been contacted with some people who I think will be able to help you. I will send them this information, and if they are agreeable I will connect them with you." Within the next two days she replied: "I would like to introduce you to... she has a long and distinguished career working on national security. She also spent four years in Saudi Arabia. She continues to work closely with women there and I think will be a great resource to you."

She introduced me to an American woman from Washington DC who is known for organizing Saudi Arabian women's conferences and is affiliated with diplomats. I followed up with the woman from DC and on February 16, 2016 she replied:

I am delighted to read of this research. I have many names to give. As you know the two women who won in Jeddah are facing a struggle over being allowed into the council room. There are few prominent Saudi women that come back and forth to the states... but Skype or what's app will also work for interviews. If there was a chance [you] could come to DC, I hold quarterly networking sessions for Saudi women students (there are over 2,000 women students)… and [you] might want to come to one of these and have face to face conversations... The Saudis do not allow civil society or NGO's... so it is interesting how the women have reached out to each other.

I was happy to hear this proposition and looked forward to flying to DC. Initially, this woman seemed interested in my topic and she even gave me information about Saudi Arabian women who have participated in Municipal Council Elections stating that some of her acquaintances would be willing to speak to me. To my surprise, she never replied

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after this. I sent her an email message on February 18, 2016 that was left unanswered. Finally, on March 1, 2016 my thesis advisor emailed her on my behalf:

Amal would like to interview Saudi women to get a sense of how women in politics is working in their country, and from my understanding---see messages below--you would be a great contact for her through your networking groups. She is quite willing to come to D.C. to talk to the women, and has organized a few questions to ask them. Do you have any immediate plans for another networking meeting? Would you like any assurances from me about Amal's project? She has already prepared a research proposal and set of specific question for an interview that might last from 15-30 minutes max, and is well-aware of sensitivities around the issues.

This time she responded:

Hello to you all. Sorry for the delay in responding... Because of all this travel, I have not planned the next Saudi networking event yet. It will probably be in April. However, I could do some [electronic] introductions for Amal and some of these women. You are correct that many might be concerned about speaking publicly on political issues. Would their identities be respected?

On March 3, 2016 she introduced me to about six Saudi Arabian women contacts:

Hello to you all! I wanted you to meet Amal Azimova... She is working on her Master's thesis on the development of the new political participation of women in the Kingdom. Amal could Skype you or FaceTime or WhatsApp. Also, if you know of others who might want to be interviewed, please let me know.

These women never responded after I emailed them one more time on March 10, 2016.

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Lastly, my thesis advisor on March 3, 2016 contacted a Professor E in Colorado Springs and introduced my research topic on my behalf. I was referred to a doctoral student from Saudi Arabia who I was able to interview and who provided me with insightful information, which will be explained in the later section.

I personally reached out to over forty contacts both in the United States and in Saudi Arabia, to women from various walks of life: activists in Saudi Arabian politics, celebrities, and students. Additionally, I know that my initial chain of contacts have reached out on my behalf to over eighty potential Saudi Arabian women. I contacted all my professors both at the University of Denver and the American University of Sharjah asking them for referrals of Saudi Arabian women contacts. I reached out to my acquaintances in the UAE and in the US, but these attempts did not guide me to more Saudi Arabian contacts, therefore I have not included them. In the course of my encounters with Saudi Arabian women, many have promised to introduce my research inquiry to more contacts, but this too never worked out. In general, my own numerous attempts to get a response from Saudi Arabian women were left unanswered, ignored, and forgotten. In some instances, I did receive a brief note explaining unwillingness to participate in the study. I thought, "Why would these women refuse to participate? Am I the only one enthusiastic about the future of women's political participation in the Kingdom? Or is it that the recent political space granted to women was a mere façade that has not produced a positive reform that could alter attitudes?" Then I wondered whether my questions were culturally inappropriate. But how could four innocent questions that probed the level of a participant's education and their overall attitude towards women's

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political participation be considered culturally sensitive? Hence, finding Saudi Arabian nationals who could freely speak about gender dynamics of exclusion or inclusion operating among citizens, or the status of civil–political activisms in the Kingdom seemed an impossible task. Many individuals whom I have reached out to were at first eager about the possibility of sharing their experiences, but later they refused to do so. Nonetheless, I remained resolute to my task, and I was able to schedule informal brief interviews with four Saudi Arabian women.

Since January 2016, I reached out with my research proposal to Saudi Arabian women residing in the Kingdom and in the United States. Despite frequent attempts, by April I had secured informal conversations via FaceTime with just four Saudi Arabian women. I concluded that Saudi Arabian women were reluctant to share their experiences or even reflect upon their attitudes towards women's political participation. Saudi Arabian government and society cannot readily accept a researcher probing for information, as inquiring about the political situation or people's lives is generally frowned upon. The situation could be one of mistrust towards the foreign researcher, as well as towards the government that could retaliate with unprecedented consequences. The government censures Saudi Arabians from speaking openly about issues. One Saudi Arabian student I was in touch with, who cautiously agreed to be interviewed, later said:

Unfortunately, I can't proceed with the interview. I got a warning from my supervisor this week that I'm not allowed to talk about the country's politics or any controversial issues related to Saudi Arabia, otherwise it will cost me my full scholarship. I'm not sure whether it is a coincidence or my computer and emails are monitored. Therefore,

for security reasons, I'm not going to be able to help. I really wanted to help, as your topic is relevant to my interests. Sorry again.

I was aware of the sensitivity of my topic inquiry; hence it was no longer surprising that I only had four informal conversations. Saudi Arabian women avoid openly confronting the state that perpetuates women's exclusion and marginalization. It has become common for women to remain passive, especially when there is a lack of consensus on the part of society in regards to gender equality. Does the government of Saudi Arabia perceive drastic changes in gender relations as a threat to social and political legitimacy – legitimacy that is based upon power duality between Saudi Arabian princes and Wahhabi clerics? Perhaps there exist only two windows of opportunity by which Saudi Arabian women could openly question and voice their concerns in regards to gender inequality, i.e., through fictional literature and Internet blogging. Most Saudi Arabian women novelists express their strong opinions in regards to politics, social relations, and religion under a pen name (Al-Rasheed 2013). Such camouflage provides Saudi Arabian women with a shield from harassment, public prosecution, stigmatization, and punishment. If Saudi Arabian women were to openly challenge both religious and political authority, they may be subjected to legal consequences.

I never expected that the process would involve so many challenges; the main challenge of course was finding participants that were willing to openly discuss sensitive topics. I have truly followed the steps required to ensure greater cooperation from Saudi Arabian participants. I have made multiple attempts to reach out to Saudi Arabian women with a persuasive introductory brief in advance. I followed up with each woman

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explaining my research study in great detail. Hence, my case witnessed a lack of cooperation rather than lack of contact, and the reason for the former was political distrust that pushed Saudi Arabian women to remain passive in regards to my requests. Even though the culture of Saudi Arabian society maybe highly altruistic, i.e. social trust is embedded among individuals since childhood, long-term exposure to authoritarianism and the system of surveillance has inhibited the social trust between Saudi Arabians. Generally, Saudi Arabians are mistrustful towards each other unless they share closer interpersonal connections; for example, Saudi Arabians do not intervene in the internal workings of the state or discuss political issues openly with each other because citizens are under 24 hour surveillance by the secret police forces. Thus, in order to maintain individual harmony, Saudi Arabians keep themselves outside of the political realm.

Hence, as a researcher my intention was to interview Saudi Arabian women activists in order to capture their attitudes, interests and behavior in regards to women's political participation in the Kingdom. However, I realized that in reality, probing Saudi Arabian women for such information would be almost inaccessible, since women are reluctant to speak due to fear of repercussion from the government. The government does not respect civil liberties and censures its citizens from disclosing information related to political issues. Women who expose their views liberally in regards to issues such as women driving or women working in unsegregated environments face political repression from the government. Although participants were assured of non-disclosure of personal information that could breach their confidentiality, fear of repercussion was potentially the main impediment in participation. If women's names are exposed, they may face

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legal punishment in the form of arbitrary imprisonment. Others may escape legal punishment but may be subject to social stigmatization, because in Saudi Arabian society personal reputation is a matter of the family.

Being from a former Soviet Socialist republic, I could relate from my personal experience. The government of Uzbekistan impedes political and civil liberties, and citizens are alienated from political participation. Uzbeks often do not like to discuss the political situation or express their opinions because they are afraid of the consequences. Due to continuous surveillance of the public, citizens are only free to express their opinions with people whom they truly trust. Expressing political opinions with unfamiliar individuals may lead to political consequences. Therefore, my analysis for the research discussed offers details regarding the research process itself, underlining difficulties encountered in retrieving information and in the recruitment of participants for the research study. I will also incorporate four distinctive interviews with Saudi Arabian women.

I contacted about forty Saudi Arabian women, but was only able to get responses from four women while the other thirty-six women did not respond. Although a lot of women expressed interest in my research study, they later refused to participate. I can conclude that Saudi Arabian women despite political space have not achieved political or civil liberty. Women are not able to express their opinions or attitudes freely because the government disallows freedom of expression and considers negative opinions as threatening to internal stability. During the electoral process, the government instituted a lot of legal barriers to prevent women from acquiring political positions, while the

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seventeen women who managed to acquire seats as councilors continued to face a lot of discrimination. Therefore, I am certain that it is political repression that prevented Saudi Arabian women from talking to me. At the beginning of my research process I did not expect I would encounter lack of cooperation; however, after discovering that Saudi Arabian women faced legal barriers in political participation, lack of cooperation no longer seemed surprising.

Discovering Women's Views

Despite perceived risks, I was able to have four informal conversations that found their way to the pages of this thesis. To remain ethical, I will not include any personal identifiers that could jeopardize the confidentiality of my interviewees. The women indeed depicted bravery to provide me with information and share their own personal stories. All four women demanded recognition, services, and legal change from the state that could facilitate gender equality in the realms of politics, economics and social aspects. Three of the women I spoke to are students obtaining graduate degrees in the US, and one woman is an economist working in Saudi Arabia. Out of the four women I interviewed, only one is a political activist promoting women's rights and equality in the economic sector. All four depict feminist consciousness, but are divided in regards to the source of Saudi Arabian women's marginalization: some blame the state, while others blame the religious clergy. All women except one perceived women's political participation in the Municipal Council elections as a first positive step towards better gender equality in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Lastly, the four women spoke fondly of

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the former King Abdullah and accredited him as a women's reformist. Three out of the four women I have interviewed participated in the national Municipal Council elections.

An Economist. The first interview I conducted was on February 2, 2016 via FaceTime, and lasted for about ninety minutes. This was the only woman that responded to the Saudi Arabian celebrity's introduction. In an email, she said:

> Dear Amal, please excuse my late response. I wish you all the best in your studies. Whereabouts do you live? You mentioned your school but I am not sure where that is… I am delighted to help in anyway I can. I will be in Riyadh for a conference tomorrow, maybe that day we could talk. Let me know what suits you.

I immediately responded, and we exchanged numbers and had a FaceTime call the next day. This Saudi Arabian woman was particularly skeptical about the future of civil-political rights, including women's equality in the society. She was very informative in her discussion, providing me with information that was not yet reported or verified by Saudi Arabian or international media. For example, there were no accounts of the Jeddah incident across the Gulf newspapers, or leading international news agencies. Perhaps she held a most pessimistic view in regards to the future of the Kingdom. In her opinion, the Kingdom and women were better off under the former King Abdullah, who initiated women's participation not just politically but also economically. When asked about her formal education and the education of her parents, she responded saying, "I hold an MA in Education which I acquired here in Saudi Arabia, both of my parents were educated." When I asked her whether women need the real support of men to get ahead in society,

and if they do not have it, whether their activities and political participation would be limited, she argued:

> ...For Saudi women to achieve something there ought to be "male – critical enabler" who would support women's initiatives and advocate for change on their behalf. King Abdullah was one of such male enablers, along with the Prince al Walled bin Talal who financed such pro-women initiatives through lobbying.

Then I inquired whether she believes that Saudi Arabian women today are more empowered in politics, economics, and social aspects than they were ten years ago. She responded with an example:

> … In early 1999, Saudi women that had some capital either from inheritance or personal savings were discouraged from engaging in commerce due to stringent legal barriers, despite of their numerous attempts. In order for a Saudi Arabian woman to start a business, she was first required to obtain legal attestation from the Ministry of Commerce located in the Chamber of the Commerce– an all male building.

My interviewee said that in the absence of a women's department in the Chamber of the Commerce due to strict policies of gender segregation, Saudi Arabian women were simply banned from entering the building. She then explained:

> ...Saudi women either had to obtain legal permission by sending a male guardian to act on their behalf or were forced to open a business without legal documentation. The women that managed to obtain permission and open a business would further face discrimination from the male officers at the Chamber... They would refuse to provide services or would ignore the requests made by women. For example, Saudi

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businesswomen would be left uninformed about the legal procedural amendments or business related regulations. But Saudi women-owned business increased throughout the Kingdom, recognizing the important economic benefit that these businesswomen brought about. In 2004, the government ordered a reform of the Chamber. According to this respondent, following the new decree for the first time a women's department was established in the Chamber exclusively to aid women in entrepreneurship. The women's department offered services such as entrepreneurial trainings, loans, and subsidies for businesses with deficient capital, administrative and legal work. The new economic opening provided Saudi Arabian women a niche within the economic sector in which they participated equally with men.

Nevertheless, she said a majority of Saudi Arabian women were unable to pursue a profession in the economic sector because "they lacked financial capacity for entrepreneurship." I also asked her, why highly educated Saudi Arabian women despite their skills and qualifications are unable to secure jobs. She replied:

When Saudi government limits production to only one commodity – oil, there are no other industries that could account for employment. The youth that was sent out to Western nations on educational grants would come back to an increasing unemployment.

Furthermore, this Saudi Arabian woman was skeptical about the Municipal Council elections. I asked, "What do you think prevents women from voting for female candidates?" She believed that low turnout from women was due to electoral barriers that were created in order to limit women's participation. She said:

There were about 200 electoral polling stations installed across the Kingdom, however the time given for women to prepare the legal requirements prevented women from participation. Those who wished to participate in voting had to provide a proof of residency and show a property deed.

Generally, these documents are under the disposal of male guardians, thus Saudi Arabian women's low turnout could be a result of the government's policy. In addition, she explained, "…Women lack knowledge in regards to electoral process and political participation, and this prompted many women to abstain from voting."

The interviewee also said that other factors further prevented women from competing in the elections. She said, "... Few competent, committed, and smart women... I personally know were unable to run because they did not have time to establish their campaign platform. Other women who did manage to compete lacked technical skills in relation to electoral campaign." The 2015 elections resulted in seventeen women successfully securing seats out of 818 elected and 1636 total seats at the Municipal Councils. Some of the women representatives were faced with discrimination during their first Municipal Council meeting. She brought an example:

... Specifically in Jeddah, male Councilors refused to sit at the table with women Councilors and demanded that women should be seated in a segregated room. Women Councilors objected to this discrimination arguing that the electorate rightfully elected them and therefore would remain seated at the same table with men based upon the principles of equality. The situation escalated to conflict, the unconvinced male Councilors lobbied the Minister of the Municipal and Rural Affairs to initiate a

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regulation that would place women Councilors separate from men as per the national law of gender segregation. Today this law is applicable to all the Municipalities despite the fact that other regions did not face such an issue.

Hence, in the view of this woman, "the hope that was once gained was lost again." Despite political participation, women remain marginalized to the extent that they could not be seated in the same room with their male counterparts.

My interviewee mentioned that it was important for Saudi Arabian women to be patient and to demand a gradual change by winning the support of "critical male enablers" on the side of women. She argued, "...In Saudi society women's equality in the political sphere could be gained through a gradual strategy like was implemented by the women advocating for equality in the economic sphere." She shared her personal experience in support of her argument, stating that in 2011 a group of pro-women activists including her mobilized in front of the Industry and Commerce Chamber demanding to be present during the discussion of the members. Initially, they faced closed doors, but because they were persistent, i.e. they would show up every month in front of the building, eventually women were allowed to be present during discussions but in a segregated room. Later, these women attending the monthly sessions were even granted permission to ask questions or give suggestions, thus the meeting resembled a town hall open debate. Hence, she concluded that in order to achieve something in Saudi Arabian society, women ought to be patient and committed, because their commitment could eventually convince Saudi Arabian male enablers to take the stance of women.

Interestingly, this woman provided me with more in-depth information that made me wonder why out of the forty women I have been in touch with she was the only one speaking freely. I wondered whether this woman was fearless, or whether there was something else that I was not aware of. One explanation is that this woman was in some way related to royalty or at least protected by a royal figure. She spoke frankly and most of the information she brought up in our discussion was verifiable in existing records. However, I could not verify the information on the Jeddah Municipal Council incident. Lastly, while I thought I was investigating, maybe I myself was the subject of an investigation. She asked me many personal questions (where I am from, what did I do in the UAE, where my parents are from and where they lived). I spoke to this woman via a mobile phone application called WhatsApp. She was curious about the origins of my number (it was not a USA number. I explained that it was the UAE old number, which I retained to ensure I do not lose my old UAE contacts, and she seemed satisfied with this answer). She paid close attention to my research and asked why I was interested in the subject of Saudi Arabian women's political participation. At that time I truly believed that the Kingdom had made a bold step forward. Saudi Arabia finally granted women the right to political participation. I thought that this would further lead to more freedoms for women, which made me an idealist, as I realized later.

This woman was also willing to introduce me to about 30 of her contacts. She said:

There are many young women I know of, who would want to speak to you and answer your questions, some of them were participating in the Municipal Council Elections,

some were prominent businesswomen. Send me your introductory brief through

"WhatsApp" I will forwarded this to them.

I did as she said, but did not get a message back from her until almost three months later.

She reached out to me on May 8, 2016, asking how was my thesis proceeding. I told her

that I changed my thesis topic because it was difficult to find many Saudi Arabian

women willing to participate in the research. She said: "I am sorry to hear this but why

did you not tell me? I could have helped you find as many contacts as you needed." Well,

I did reach out to her, and she was not helpful. Then she asked if I could send her my

research topic. I basically forwarded the same email message I had sent her previously. It

was strange that this woman contacted me again and I wondered, "What was her

intention? What information was she getting?"

Sciences Student. The second interview was conducted on March 5, 2016 via

FaceTime for a duration of about forty-five minutes. This woman is pursuing a doctorate

at a United States University. I was introduced to her through the referral made by my

thesis advisor. This Saudi Arabian woman is married and lives with her two children,

while her husband is receiving practical training as a medical doctor in Europe. I asked

her what she intends to do after graduation and she said: "I want to go back to Saudi

Arabia and work as a Professor in one of the Universities in Saudi Arabia." When I asked

her if her parents were educated, she said that they were not, and added that they were

"very old." In regards to the question asking about her political participation, the

interviewee responded, "I did participate in the Municipal Council Elections, my relative

was running for the elections… It was my duty to show full support regardless the

difficult electoral process." I further inquired whether she herself would run in the future elections, and she eagerly said "why not?" She then added that she believes that more women ought to use this opportunity and run for elections in order to outnumber the men. "If you believe in gender equality then you should initiate the first steps to achieve it." When asked if her family and husband would be supportive of her candidacy, she uttered with confidence that they would. She said that her husband is politically disengaged; she actually had to encourage him to cast a vote for her relative in the 2015 elections. She perceived the work of the Municipal Council elections as an important contributor that could facilitate both social and gender equality in the respective municipalities. "Having women representatives would foster accountability towards women electorate and promote issues related to health care, education and childcare." I asked her about the driving scenario question, and she said she would not participate because it is illegal and may lead to unnecessary consequences. Although she loves to drive and she has a US driving license, she is willing to wait until women are granted the permission to drive in Saudi Arabia. She explained that being a mother she feels responsible, and even though she might get support from her family to drive, she would not have violated the law. She mentioned that she does feel safe as a woman in Saudi Arabia, with her family granting her the full support she needs. A few days after I spoke to her she contacted me and said: "During last call with you I really enjoy your questions and speaking, and I copied my friend, you can contact her, she is such a helpful girl." I contacted her friend but she never responded.

Education Student. The third interview was conducted on March 13, 2016, via FaceTime, but lasted only twenty minutes. When asked, "What is your highest level of education, what degree? And what about your mother and father?" This woman answered, "I am pursuing a Masters in Education. While both of my parents were educated with Bachelor degrees from Saudi Arabian Universities, and my husband is currently a PhD candidate at a U.S. University." She also mentioned that both of them are sponsored by the Saudi Arabian government's scholarship fund. She mentioned that she voted during the Municipal Council elections because it was a big step in Saudi Arabian women's achievement. When I inquired, "I would like to know about how your family supports your political participation?" She said: "I do not discuss political issues with my parents, because they are not interested, but I do talk about political issues with my husband. He supports me more, he did not object when I wanted to participate in the elections as a voter." She also seemed a firm believer in women's rights, but was very cautious. I asked her, "I would like you to imagine the scenario of a number of women deciding to drive in your country to protest the driving ban. How likely are you to join them and drive a car?" She explained, "Yes, I support the idea that Saudi women should drive because it would make our lives so much easier – but I myself will not participate in an open protest." She explained that advocating for women's inclusivity could lead to negative consequences not just for her but also for her family, and she refuses to place her family in such danger. When asked whether she feels that women need the real support of men to get ahead in society, she confirmed, saying: "… Saudi women need men for everything… you know we have this rule – we need permission from our male

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guardians to go out, to work or to study." When I inquired whether that rule impacts her activities, she said: "Not at all, I am very lucky, my father never objected to anything that I asked for, and now my husband as well supports me in my decisions. We have an understanding."

Sciences Student. The last interview was conducted on April 12, 2016 via FaceTime for about thirty minutes. I was introduced to this woman through a referral from a doctoral Saudi Arabian male student at the University of Denver. She perceived the Municipal Council elections in a negative light as an institution that reflected state sponsored policies with a lack of accountability and no independence. In her view, the mechanism for the selection of candidates is biased because candidates who are allowed to compete originate from wealthier Saudi Arabian families with connections to Saudi Arabian royalty. She believed that the Municipal Councils lack the capacity to initiate social change, and therefore could not foster women's equality in the Kingdom. She said: "…The power of the councilors is advisory, one cannot expect that they would actually initiate a change in the policy."

Although this woman did not participate in the elections, she is an activist for women's rights. Mainly, she thinks Saudi Arabian women ought to be allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia because it would provide women with employment opportunities and therefore would foster women's financial independence. She administers a weblog that campaigns against the "women's driving ban." On her blog, other Saudi Arabian women express their support for the campaign through comments. When asked about the driving scenario question, she stated that she would not hesitate to join other women in protest

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against the "driving ban." She further explained that she was taught to drive by her father when she was sixteen, and both her father and her brothers support her advocacy against the Saudi Arabian women's driving ban. However, her mother disapproves of her online activism because she fears for her daughter's reputation. She mentioned that whenever she goes back to Saudi Arabia for holidays, she tends to teach her young siblings to drive in the backyard. When asked if she would consider her family conservative, she said, "…Not at all, both of my parents are open minded, they fully support me in all my decisions… it is just my mom sometimes gets worried…" Then I added, "I would like to know about how your family supports your decisions. Can you give an example of how your parents support you?" She said:

> Well you know I live all by myself, while my brother who is my actual guardian lives on his own in another state. I can do whatever I want… he does not care. I travel a lot around the US visiting my friends. My parents know they do not mind for as long as I stay safe.

When she knew that I lived in the UAE, she said, "… I will come visit you, hopefully by then we will be allowed to drive, so I can actually drive through the border… I did before." For the last question, "It is sometimes suggested that women need the real support of men to get ahead in the society. If they do not have it, their activities and political participation will be limited," she answered, "… There is no question that in order to achieve something in Saudi society women needs the help of men. If there is no such help, then women will not even speak out." In the future, she hopes to acquire a PhD, however after graduating with her master's degree she must return to Saudi Arabia

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to teach in one of the Universities in fulfillment of the two-year government's contract. She also mentioned that although she wishes that Saudi Arabian women were freer, she does not believe it will happen in the near future.

Summary

I was able to speak to just four Saudi Arabian women, which does not constitute a sample, and the responses I received from these Saudi Arabian women were very similar: all four believe that education is the first aspect that leads to women's equality and empowerment in the Kingdom. Education also creates job security for Saudi Arabian women. For instance, the three women students were all studying outside of Saudi Arabia on government sponsored scholarships. Employment opportunities in the Kingdom are low, but the scholarship grants each recipient a contract for employment in one of the Kingdom's universities. In general, all four women strive for gender equality, and view the political participation of women as necessary for women's empowerment, but only a few are ready to speak critically about policies of discrimination that the Kingdom unfairly imposes. Only three of these women participated in the Municipal Council election voting in 2015, and perceived it as a first step towards gender equality. They also believed that this opportunity was important for Saudi Arabian women as it encouraged women's participation in the political arena, which before was accessible only to men. Only one woman criticized the Municipal Council elections because she questioned the transparency and accountability of the system. She perceived that only well-off candidates were able to stand in the elections, and that once voted into the office such women candidates would not necessarily advance women's rights in the country because

their power is limited. Therefore, all four women did recognize that their political participation is limited in the country; however, one can overcome such limits through the male critical enablers and patience. In Saudi Arabian society women need the help of men to achieve almost everything; hence, women ought to win the support of these critical men. One such example was the King Abdullah, who was seen by these Saudi Arabian women as a pro-women reformist.

Out of the four interviews, only one interviewee spoke negatively about the government, while the others were more silent on the issue of the government. This is due to the fact that repressive governments do not tolerate opposing views; those who express such views serve as political prisoners. In Saudi Arabia the government criminalizes political dissent, hence one is safe by not presenting views on politics publically. The "driving ban scenario" question showed some indication that Saudi Arabian women were afraid to participate in nonviolent protests to express their dissatisfaction about a discriminatory policy. Two women justified their unwillingness to participate: one feared it would lead to dangerous consequences for her family, while the other felt that it was illegal and violation of the law which could imply penalties. It is no secret that in the past, when pro-women's rights activists violated societal norms that reinforced gender discrimination and gender stereotypes, the state reacted with repression. These women activists not only received arbitrary detention, but also often were treated unfairly by the society after serving prison sentences. In Saudi Arabian society women could be subjected to harsh social stigmatization, which may impede women's reputations and honor. Hence, because risks are so high, the majority of Saudi

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Arabian women conform to the system and choose to remain passive in regards to political or civil rights. They would rather wait for political opening, hoping that it will lead to a change in their social status.

Consequently, one interviewee who did mention that she would participate in the driving ban protest recognized the risks, and deemed it dangerous. Only one woman admitted her willingness to participate in political discussion against discriminatory laws and raising concerns via the Internet. In the example of one of my interviewees who runs a blog against the women's driving ban, she mentioned that the Internet provides "a space for women's voices." She then added that there are many Saudi Arabians who are active in her blog and support her initiative. This is in support of the theory of political participation, which stresses that women may feel safe to demand their political rights through unconventional means of political participation, but they cannot yet do so through direct means. Perhaps the political participation of Saudi Arabian women remains limited due to fear of political repression.

Political repression is evident in the Kingdom, because women's rights activists are still struggling to achieve greater equality to end discrimination. The regime in the past has cracked pro-women rights movements, harassing the activists and preventing them from forming an opposition movement. Hence, the Saudi Arabian government's use of repression has resulted in a culture of fear. My encounters with forty Saudi Arabian women demonstrates these effects: women are not ready to share political opinions simply because they are not free to express their views, and they fear the consequences. The Saudi Arabian government does not tolerate freedom of expression because it

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perceives such freedom to be threatening to political stability, as different political ideas may lead to the development of regime dissidents. If the government allowed citizens to freely express their views, then Saudi Arabian women would be more cooperative and willing to talk to international researchers. Through dialogue there could be an improvement; by brining in international awareness, Saudi Arabian women may achieve their aspirations for women's rights and equality. Political activism of Saudi Arabian women – i.e. voicing their concerns and spreading awareness about the status of women's rights and equality – pushed the government to initiate political reforms due to unwanted international oversight. However, only Saudi Arabian women would truly know the effects of the new political space, hence Saudi Arabian women ought to be asked to capture their sense of freedoms so as to evaluate the impact of the 2015 elections. Thus it is absolutely necessary that Saudi Arabian women cooperate and participate in such research inquiries because only through attaining a voice can they acquire greater freedom.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Findings

The original purpose of this thesis was to find out whether recent political space granted to Saudi Arabian women through the government's initiation enhanced women's political participation in the Kingdom. My focus was to learn the views and attitudes of Saudi Arabian women towards the new political opening, whether women felt that they had acquired greater equality and rights in the society. My intention was to get a sense of what the 2015 Municipal Council elections meant for Saudi Arabian women – whether it granted Saudi Arabian women political space for voicing their concerns and issues. I sought to conduct interviews with Saudi Arabian women activists because I was interested in their opinions. This seemed an opportune time to carry out such discussions because I was confident that Saudi Arabian women would be eager to share their personal experiences, life stories, and opinions in light of the 2015 elections.

The next step was to find Saudi Arabian women who would agree to participate in my research study. Many expressed an initial interest in my research topic. However, later these women refused to participate in an interview. Out of forty contacts I was in touch with, I have managed to obtain interviews with just four Saudi Arabian women. Most of the women I contacted did not respond to my research queries. Some women expressed their eagerness and interest in participating, but later were not responsive to my numerous follow up email messages. A few have explained that they could not participate

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in research that probes for political opinion. Others were willing to participate, but only through a questionnaire because they wanted to remain completely anonymous and not disclose their identities to me.

An important question emerges: why are Saudi Arabian women *interested* in the subject, but unwilling to engage in open discussion on the subject? I reached the conclusion that most Saudi Arabian women respondents were afraid to express their views. These women did not interpret the right of freedom of speech as a part of the political change that occurred when the Kingdom decided to allow women the right to vote and stand as candidates for the Municipal Elections. From my analysis, I concluded that Saudi Arabian women were not free to share their thoughts, opinions, and attitudes in relation to recent political space because such space was limited. They felt constrained to express and share their attitudes.

The literature on political repression asserts that authoritarian governments implement limited political reforms in order to control citizens' political participation. Concessions are made because the state perceives such concessions as unthreatening for the internal stability, and in reality concessions do not grant citizens any actual power by which they could influence the decision-making process. The authoritarian state often chooses to promote women's inclusivity in the political realm because they do not view women's political participation as a threat. Women, when granted political positions, depict a low level of political power because their participation is under the direct scrutiny of the authoritarian regime. Therefore, granting political space to women cannot be equated to granting political and civil liberties, as women although able to participate

may be unable to influence the political apparatus. A repressive government frowns upon citizens' political participation, and when political concessions are initiated these remain restricted in order to maintain control over the population. Hence, Saudi Arabian women are afraid to speak out against certain discriminating policies because it may entail negative consequences and government retaliation. In the view of Saudi Arabian women, political participation is slow and a gradual process. Based on my research, I can conclude that some Saudi Arabian women would rather chose to live with oppression and hope for the improvement of their social status in the future, while others do not aspire for women's equality and rights in the society because they adhere to the state's sponsored political culture and do not consider themselves oppressed. Only a handful of women are willing to take drastic initiatives to demand political, economic, and social change through participation, and that is through the realm of the Internet, which may be a way to avoid the risks associated with political repression in a context of authoritarian regimes.

In a non-democratic regime citizens are reluctant to voice their political opinions and express their dissatisfaction openly; this silence is projected upon them by a regime that is unaccountable towards citizens' rights. In Saudi Arabia, there were clear signs of citizens' political activism expressed by the use of unconventional means of political participation, i.e., Saudi Arabian women attempting to facilitate a change towards women's rights and equality through indirect participation (Internet activism and violations of the driving ban). Yet in my efforts to inquire about Saudi Arabian women's sense of political participation and freedoms, despite the numerous attempts I made to

contact them, I almost always-encountered "silence," as Saudi Arabian women were hesitant to speak to me. I followed a method of chain referral that ought to facilitate the possibility of responses, yet I was still unable to get answers.

Although it is not certain what this silence entails, if it means a deliberate inhibition to express one's views to seek recognition and respect for such views, then there ought to be a reason for one's total silence. If citizens in a non-democratic regime are voiceless and are prevented from expressing their own views – whether such views are in favor or against the current status quo – then such a society is not free. I only obtained four distinctive interviews, all from educated Saudi Arabian women, and only one could be considered an activist for women's rights in Saudi Arabia, while the other three were students at U.S. universities. Therefore, silence could also mean that when occasional people decide to voice their views in a non-democratic system, one cannot be certain whether these people are genuine outliers who take risks, or planted spokespersons. Expression of one's voice and opinion is an example of citizens' political participation by which citizens could foster a change in a governmental policy, or reinforce the status quo. Having a voice enables citizens to express their positions in relation to the incumbent regime. Voice can facilitate political activism and political freedoms, because through voice the incumbent's accountability is obtained, while silence will almost always undermine political accountability and freedoms.

Contribution of Study

This thesis contributes to the study of political participation in the context of authoritarian systems, emphasizing that political concessions granted by authoritarian

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rulers remain limited in scope and cannot be equated to political freedoms. Citizens' aspirations for political participation almost always remain curtailed by an authoritarian state's use of political repression. In theory political participation is a broad concept by which citizens' political activism is expressed and used to exert pressure upon the political elites in order to push them to take action or initiate a change in a governmental policy. Political participation is important because it generates accountability of political elites towards the citizens. In democratic societies, citizens are not constrained in political participation. They use both direct and indirect means in expression of political activism. Citizens routinely criticize government policies, speak openly about their views, and are not afraid to voice their opinions, even to random strangers. However, in a non-democratic political setting such criticisms are often suppressed and discouraged because citizens fear negative consequences from their government, and avoid taking risks in participation. The only channel remaining for citizens to be able to express political views in such settings is through ways where they may not face punishment, i.e., via the Internet. Although the Internet realm provides citizens with a means to voice their concerns and political dissatisfaction, in the context of non-democratic regimes the influence of such participation is minimal due to the culture of unaccountability that defines the essence of such regimes. In the course of my study, I found that Saudi Arabian women were reluctant to engage in open discussion of political participation, women's rights, and freedoms – unlike what would be expected in a democratic system. My encounters with Saudi Arabian women and their continuous silence confirmed what theories on political repression described, especially in relation to a Sultanistic form of

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governance. My study offers some empirical support for citizens' political behavior in the context of authoritarian regimes that condemn citizens' aspirations for political freedoms and political participation.

Political repression inhibits citizens' participation because those individuals dissatisfied with the policies of the repressive state choose to remain silent and refrain from openly confronting the state, fearing the consequences. In the course of my inquiry I found that Saudi Arabian women chose to be silent and conform to the state's policies that reinforce women's marginalization and inequality in the society. Even though many had initially expressed a strong interest in my research that seemed to indicate they may have wanted to voice their views, on second thought they decided not to do so. To initiate a change women must overcome the political barriers enforced by a repressive state, but women cannot overcome these barriers when they refrain from voicing their concerns. Therefore, the findings confirm that political repression reinforces the political status quo and restrains citizens' political participation.

Limitations of Study

The sensitivity of the topic could be a potential inhibitor in women's participation in the research study. Saudi Arabian women are not yet ready to speak openly and honestly about political issues because the government of Saudi Arabia imposes censorship upon citizens' expression of political speech – views and opinions underlining political context. However, political culture could be another potential inhibitor that prevented women from participating in the research study. There are many Saudi Arabian women who remain politically disengaged or disinterested because they are satisfied with

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the current status quo. Hence, Saudi Arabian women's silence could be the result of political disinterest and disengagement. When tradition, culture and religious interpretations designate women as only having "natural" obligations women simply remain silent and passive towards politics. Perhaps these women viewed my interest in the political participation of Saudi Arabian women as a threat to the genuine culture of Saudi Arabia, and perceived me as another foreign researcher who is interested in diffusing Saudi Arabian religious and cultural percepts with Western ideals. In short, the lack of cooperation from Saudi Arabian women greatly restricted what conclusions I may draw about this study. Although my study incorporates four distinctive interviews, this is negligible because conclusions could not be drawn from such a small sample. I cannot know for certain how representative the views of the four women were, how truthful were these responses, or whether they were extreme or average. I do know, however, that many political scientists interested in the women's question have also faced lack of cooperation from Saudi Arabian women when administering their interviews.

Perhaps another important limitation of my study was my own extensive reliance on the information obtained from one single outspoken woman, and the validity of information obtained from this particular source is highly questionable. I cannot know for a fact that the information she provided me with was genuine. In the course of the research process, I myself could not remain dispassionate towards the topic inquiry. As mentioned earlier, I am a strong advocate for women's political participation and women's rights. My own biases towards my topic inquiry inhibited the neutrality of the research. Throughout the research investigation I hoped that the recent political opening

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has initiated a positive impact upon Saudi Arabian women, enhancing their social, political and economic status in the Kingdom.

Finding and locating potential Saudi Arabian women participants was another limitation of my research. I was interested in conducting interviews with Saudi Arabian women political activists, and in a non-democratic regime that enforces legal barriers in order to curtail citizen's political aspirations, political activists tend to lay low or remain involved in underground (i.e. secret) participation because they fear the consequences of an open confrontation. Hence, I encountered difficulties in finding women political activists who were willing to talk to me openly. In sum, research sensitivity, political culture, small sample, over reliance on a single source, and a specific pool of participants were limitations in my approach in getting a sense of either of these concepts – women's political participation and political culture and political repression.

Future Research

In the course of my research study I witnessed a lack of cooperation from Saudi Arabian women, and this inhibited the inferential quality of my analysis because I was not able to capture diversity of views. The sensitivity of the topic could be an inhibiting factor that led to a lack of cooperation. Therefore, future research ought to neutralize the questions in order to eliminate topic sensitivity. Another aspect that could enhance Saudi Arabian women's cooperation with the research is improving contacting efforts. Although Saudi Arabian women are approachable, they are not willing to disclose information about political issues because the government of Saudi Arabia bans freedom of speech. In addition, political culture curtails women's aspirations for gender equality

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and rights in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Arabian political culture has accustomed women to a culture of silence; women are treated as legal minors with no power of voice. Hence, in Saudi Arabia when both conservative and liberal women aspire to have a voice, they do so in the realm of Internet. Saudi Arabian women are active in the realm of the Internet; therefore, targeting these individuals in particular would increase cooperation in the research. The Internet has opened doors for Saudi Arabian women's voices; a lot of women participate in online political discussions, therefore locating these participants would yield an increase in cooperation. To acquire women's views and opinions to get sense of women's political participation, researchers could contact Saudi Arabian women web bloggers, online journalists, commentators and novelists. The rate of refusals in participation could be substantially decreased if researchers approach Saudi Arabian women active in Internet political participation. In conclusion, to acquire a greater level of cooperation and participation, Saudi Arabian women ought to be asked; i.e., interviews are the only path for information. Women's views are important because without the input of women, one cannot know what women's political participation entails, and how it may inhibit women's rights and equality in society.

Appendix list of emails is available from author upon request.

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