



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
7 December 2015

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Sixtieth session

14-24 March 2016

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

Statement submitted by Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain would like to use the occasion of the 60th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women to call attention to the barriers to women's political and civil participation in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Though the kingdom has taken limited steps to expand women's exercise of basic political rights, women still do not fully participate in national political life nor can they freely organize themselves within civil society.

In December 2015, the kingdom will permit Saudi women to both vote and run as candidates in nationwide municipal elections. While the Saudi government is extending the franchise to women for the first time, authorities are significantly constraining their participation within the elections themselves. On 13 October 2015, Saudi newspapers reported that the Supreme Electoral Committee had banned female candidates from directly addressing male voters, requiring them to instead appoint male proxies or hire consultancy firms to advocate on their behalf. Women candidates who violate this edict must pay a 10,000 Riyal fine. Given the strict gender segregation enforced within the country, this rule effectively prevents Saudi women candidates from organizing open and public campaigns, negating in practice the newfound right that they have been afforded in theory. Additionally, both the direction to hire outside consultancy firms and the threat to levy an expensive fine for non-compliance place an undue burden on women candidates compared to their male counterparts.

In addition to constraining women's freedom to campaign openly, the Saudi government has prohibited women from organizing in civil society to increase women's voter turnout. On 8 August 2015, the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs suspended the operations of the Baladi Initiative. The organization, coordinated by Saudi women, had worked for several years to train women as both voters and candidates. At the time of the initiative's suspension, its chief coordinator informed Saudi media that the Baladi Initiative had trained over 350 women in 13 different workshops in 2013 and 2014.

Though women are registering to vote and campaign despite these limitations, the municipal councils lack political authority within the country. Local elected representatives fill only half the seats of each municipal council, while the rest are appointed by the Minister of Municipal and Rural Affairs. The councils also fail to empower reform-minded representatives to alter the myriad formal and informal codes that severely restrict the freedom of Saudi women, including the guardianship system, in which every woman has to receive permission from a male guardian to travel, enter university, or seek employment.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, while deserving of recognition for granting women the freedom to vote and hold elected office, has not made meaningful progress in fully guaranteeing the practical exercise of this right. We ask the international community to call for a repeal of the ban on women addressing male voters and to reinstate the activities of the Baladi Initiative and any other suspended civil society voter initiatives. We hope that renewed international pressure will encourage the kingdom to expand women's participation in public life.