

The Lifting of the Driving Ban is NO Victory for Saudi's Women

"A huge step forward for women's rights", "a historic day", "a landmark moment", "a watershed in the country". These were the statements made by many media and women's rights activists to describe the Saudi regime's lifting of the driving ban on women in the country. King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and his son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman have been showered with praise domestically and internationally for this apparently, "historical move" to improve the rights of women in the kingdom. It's been celebrated as if this is some sort of gift to women!

Really????!! Is this how low our expectations as women have become under these autocratic regimes, where being thrown a few crumbs in our direction fills us with jubilation and even a sense of gratitude, admiration or respect towards these dictatorships who have oppressed us brutally for decades and continue to do???

Have we forgotten that this regime is an absolute monarchy, where the rights of women and men alike can be snatched away as fast as they are given, based on the whim of whichever King or Prince is in power at the time? Have we forgotten that women have no political voice under this dictatorship and face arrest and imprisonment for simply criticizing the authoritarian policies of these western-installed illegitimate rulers? Have we forgotten that this is a regime that usurped the wealth of the land to enjoy lavish lifestyles, while poverty increased amongst the population? But most importantly, have we forgotten that this is a dictatorship that has the blood of thousands of Muslims in Iraq and Syria on its hands, and is responsible for the mass slaughter and starvation of the women and children of Yemen? All this is alongside the draconian non-Islamic laws which women in the country are subjected to, such as placing an absurd age limit of 30-55 years on Saudi Muslim women who wish to marry Muslim non-Saudi nationals and forcing them to seek special permission from the Ministry of State to pursue the marriage. This is in addition to denying them the right to pass on their Saudi citizenship to their own children, and banning expat Muslim women from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Chad from marrying Saudi nationals.

We should surely recognize that this authoritarian absolute monarchy, masquerading as an Islamic state, does not have a genuine concern for the wellbeing of women or a single altruistic bone in its body when granting them their rights. Rather such actions are always self-serving and have ulterior motives, mainly to bolster its rule and prolong its declining grip on power. Indeed, the lifting of this driving ban is nothing but a cheap PR stunt by a frail regime that is desperate to improve its image on the world stage and to appease its liberal critics in the West. It's a feeble attempt at performing a cheap face-lift to deflect attention from the host of injustices that women continue to suffer from in the country, and the regime's other political and economic failures and brutalities in neighbouring lands. It's on the same par as the hollow gesture of allowing women the opportunity to be voted into powerless municipal councils or be part of a toothless unelected Shura Council – both of which have no authority to initiate any real change to the lives of women, nor did these so-called 'privileges' do anything to improve the political, economic and social rights of women in the country in real terms. These cynical

reforms are simply cosmetic window-dressing to create the air of 'modernity' or 'progress' in the treatment of women, while in reality, this is far from the truth!

Rather than hailing this new decree as some kind of victory for women's rights in the country, and showering Saudi's rulers with unwarranted praise.....we should surely be reflecting on the fact that this right of women to drive, which Islam clearly permits, was NOT a right to be taken away in the first place! We should surely be asking the question....What right does this illegitimate, Western-installed regime have to decide whether it will grant or deny privileges which Islam has already guaranteed for women or men? In fact, what legitimacy do these foreign appointed rulers have, to decide on ANY matter regarding this Ummah???

Moreover, haven't we been here before??!!... Dictatorships, cynically using women's rights as a smokescreen to achieve political agendas... mainly to rally support from the secular/liberal elements of their public and western governments to strengthen their grip on power and sustain their regimes, as well as to hide the true nature of their repressive secular rule! Madawi al-Rasheed, a visiting professor at the Middle East Centre at the London School of Economics wrote in an article in *The Guardian* on the 27th of September, *"Today's authoritarian regimes will win extra praise when they appear to be liberating Muslim women from the oppression of Islam. Saudi Arabia is no exception... Dictators conveniently depict themselves as liberators of these downtrodden women while society is shown to be the oppressor. In particular, in recent times, Islam and sharia law are portrayed as the cause of women's suffering."*

The Tunisian dictators Habib Bourguiba and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali for example tried to present themselves as heroes of women by championing the western concept of gender equality, and secularizing and liberalizing Islamic social laws related to women and family life, for example by abolishing polygamy, legalizing abortion, and attacking the concept of male guardianship. Meanwhile thousands of female activists who spoke out against the oppressive policies of the regime were subjected to harassment, surveillance, intimidation, defamation campaigns, destruction of property, sexual abuse, house arrest, arbitrary detention, imprisonment, and physical aggression, including torture by the Tunisian authorities. This is alongside banning women from wearing the hijab in schools and government buildings and harassing women wearing Islamic dress in the streets and marketplaces. It was a similar story with the Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak who pursued the masquerade of being a champion of women's rights while simultaneously subjecting millions of women to lives of poverty under his failed capitalist system and policies and stealing the wealth of the people, as well as silencing the political voice of those who opposed his repressive rule through harassment, detention and imprisonment.

Similarly, the Saudi regime's lifting of the driving ban on women is not driven by the sudden development of a conscience towards women's rights by the House of Al-Saud. No, far from it! Rather, there are political and economic agendas at play. In April 2016, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman announced the Saudi regime's "Vision 2030 Project" – an initiative involving a raft of economic reforms including reducing the state's dependence on oil, a greater expansion of the non-oil based private sector and development in areas such as healthcare, education, infrastructure, recreation and tourism. It is aimed at trying to save an ailing economy that has been hit hard by low global oil prices. Poverty has been increasing in the state, youth unemployment now

stands at 30%, foreign reserve currency is fast dwindling (the IMF warned that Saudi Arabia will have no more foreign reserve currency within a 5 year period), and some analysts have even stated that there is a risk of financial bankruptcy. In fact, the news magazine, The Week, reported in April 2016 that Saudi Arabia could very soon face disorder and social chaos due to a deteriorating financial situation, stating "*without oil, the Saudi state has little else holding it together*". Hence the situation is desperate!

Achieving this '2030 Vision', which many commentators have described as improbable at best and a fantasy at worst, requires increasing the participation of women in the labour market. The project states its aim of raising female employment from 27% to 30% by 2030, which requires facilitating their free movement within society. Hence, lifting the driving ban is less a concern about women's rights and more a desperate attempt to feed a cliff-edge economy with more female workers!

As Muslim women, we should not be satisfied with bite-size political and social reforms, or mirages of political change, or crumbs of rights thrown at us by autocratic rulers and regimes to try and appease our desire for real change in our lands. Allah (swt) has ordered that we deserve much more!

Our true victory will be to rid ourselves once and for all of these self-serving autocratic regimes and establish a state that truly respects and values our status as women and our rights ordained by Allah (swt), and enshrined in the Qur'an and Sunnah. A state which is fully accountable and embodies the rule of law as a fundamental principle of governance where no ruler can grant or discard the God-given rights of the people on a whim. A state where women are facilitated and encouraged to express their political voice, to account those who govern over them, and elect their leader, and where they can openly speak out against any violation of their rights without fear. A state that will guarantee all the political, economic, educational, and social rights that our Deen has defined, and that the Prophet (saw) implemented upon society 1400 years ago as leader of the state, and that surpassed those contained in all other ways of life and systems. And a state that will be the guardian and protector of the Muslimah, her blood, her honour, her property and all her rights whenever they are violated. This state is nothing other than the Khilafah (Caliphate) based upon the method of the Prophethood which is the true Islamic leadership defined by Allah (swt).

So as Muslim women, if we truly want something to celebrate, then let us put our full efforts into the urgent establishment of this glorious state, rather than being seduced by token gestures! Allah (swt) says,

﴿وَأَنْ أَحْكَمَ بَيْنَهُمْ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ وَاحْذَرْهُمْ أَنْ يَفْتِنُوكَ عَنْ بَعْضِ مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ إِلَيْكَ﴾

"So rule between them by that which Allah has revealed, and follow not their desires, but beware of them lest they seduce you from some part of that which Allah hath revealed unto thee." [Al-Maidah: 49]

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