



Freedom in the World 2017 - Saudi Arabia

Freedom Status:
Not Free

Quick Facts

Population:
31,700,000
Capital:
Riyadh
GDP/capita:
\$20,482
Press Freedom Status:
Not Free
Net Freedom Status:
Not Free
Overview:

Ruled by the Saud family since its founding in 1932, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia restricts almost all political rights and civil liberties through a combination of oppressive laws and the use of force. No officials at the national level are elected. The regime extends some authority to clerics who follow the austere Wahhabi interpretation of Sunni Islam in exchange for affirmation of the monarchy's religious legitimacy. Ruling elites rely on extensive surveillance, the criminalization of dissent, appeals to sectarianism, and public spending supported by oil revenues to maintain power.

Key Developments:

- In January, the regime executed one of the kingdom's most prominent Shiite Muslim clerics as part of its ongoing crackdown against the religious minority.
- More than 150 people were executed during 2016, the second consecutive year in which the total passed that threshold. Defendants are generally denied due process, and many are executed for crimes other than murder.
- In April, against a backdrop of low oil prices and a struggling economy, the deputy crown prince announced an economic reform package called Saudi Vision 2030, without promising any significant political reforms.
- As the Saudi military continued its controversial bombing campaign against rebel forces in neighboring Yemen, cross-border attacks by the rebels occasionally caused deaths and injuries in the kingdom.

Executive Summary:

Beleaguered by a second full year of low oil prices, Saudi Arabia's leaders struggled to manage a weak economy in 2016. In January, Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman al-Saud, son of King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, announced that the state was planning to privatize a minority stake in the national oil company; subsequent statements indicated that the sale would be held by 2018. In April, the prince mapped out an ambitious economic strategy called Saudi Vision 2030 that aimed to overhaul the country's economy, including by "Saudiizing" the labor force to reduce unemployment among citizens, diversifying away from oil, privatizing more of the state-controlled economy, and cutting state spending and subsidies. The plan did not address political reform or offer to expand heavily restricted political rights and civil liberties. Meanwhile, Saudi officials in November agreed to an oil production cut by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the first in eight years, as part of a bid to shore up prices.

With significant logistical and political support from the United States and Britain, Saudi Arabia continued its destructive military campaign in neighboring Yemen, where groups loyal to Saudi-backed president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi were locked in a civil war against Houthi rebels and allied forces linked to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. Saudi leaders maintained that the Houthis, who sometimes launched raids or missile attacks across Saudi Arabia's southern border, were proxies for Shiite-ruled Iran, the kingdom's regional rival.

Saudi internal security forces continued their oppression of the Shiite religious minority. In January, the authorities executed a prominent Shiite cleric and outspoken critic of the regime, Nimr al-Nimr. Ali Mohammed al-Nimr, the cleric's nephew, remained on death row for his participation as a teenager in 2011 protests that led to clashes with security forces. In June, a Saudi court sentenced 14 Shiites to death for alleged attacks on security personnel during the same wave of protests, which the regime characterized as terrorism.

As in previous years, Saudi human rights and political activists were systematically persecuted and imprisoned in 2016. Despite its poor record, Saudi Arabia was reelected to its seat on the UN Human Rights Council in October. In a modest reform in April, the government announced that the religious police no longer had the authority to pursue or detain civilians, and that they could operate only during business hours, reporting violations to the civil police. The religious police had faced public criticism for abusive behavior in recent years.

Political Rights

Political Rights 3 / 40

A. Electoral Process 0 / 12

A1. Is the head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

A2. Are the national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair?

The 1992 Basic Law declares that the Koran and the Sunna (the guidance set by the deeds and sayings of the prophet Muhammad) are the country's constitution. The cabinet, which is appointed by the king, passes legislation that becomes law once ratified by royal decree. The king also appoints the 150 members of the Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council), who serve in an advisory capacity, for four-year terms. Limited elections for advisory councils at the municipal level were introduced in 2005, though these bodies exercise little real power. In municipal elections held in 2015, women were able to vote and stand as candidates for the first time—a right granted by a 2011 royal decree. Two-thirds of the seats on the 284 councils were open to voting, while the minister of municipal and rural affairs held responsibility for filling the remainder through appointment. Women won approximately 1 percent of contested seats.

In May 2016, King Salman announced significant changes to the cabinet. Most importantly, a series of moves resulted in the dismissal of longtime oil minister Ali al-Naimi. He was replaced by Khalid al-Faleh, chairman of the state oil company Aramco, who assumed control over a renamed Ministry of Energy, Industry, and Mineral Resources. The cabinet reshuffle signaled the king's support for the new economic strategy overseen by his son, Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who is also the defense minister. The move also raised questions about whether the prince's rapid rise and influence would unsettle the line of succession. Interior Minister Mohammed bin Nayef, the current crown prince, is widely seen as a rival to Mohammed bin Salman, his younger cousin.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation 0 / 16

B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system open to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

B2. Is there a significant opposition vote and a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, totalitarian parties, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group?

B4. Do cultural, ethnic, religious, or other minority groups have full political rights and electoral opportunities?

Political parties are forbidden, and organized political opposition exists only outside the country. Political dissent is criminalized. Activists who challenge the kingdom's record on political inclusion or call for constitutional changes are treated harshly. Raef Badawi, a human rights activist and founder of the website Liberal Saudi Network, remained behind bars in 2016 after being sentenced in 2014 to 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes for "insulting Islam." Badawi was subjected to a first round of flogging in early 2015, and a report that surfaced in October claimed that a second round was imminent. The kingdom's crackdown on one of the country's most prominent political rights organizations, the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), continued in 2016. In April ACPRA founding member Issa al-Hamid was sentenced to nine years in prison, extended later in 2016 to 11 years. In June his colleague and fellow ACPRA member Abdulaziz al-Shubaili was sentenced to eight years in prison. Several other ACPRA members remained imprisoned in 2016. In January Samar Badawi, wife of the imprisoned activist Waleed Abu al-Khair and sister of Raef Badawi, was briefly detained by police in Jeddah.

The Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamist political organization, and Hezbollah, the Lebanon-based and Iranian-backed Shiite militia group, have been designated as terrorist organizations in

Saudi Arabia since 2014, reflecting official concerns about the domestic popularity of both entities, which are considered threats to the regime.

C. Functioning of Government 1 / 12

C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?

C2. Is the government free from pervasive corruption?

C3. Is the government accountable to the electorate between elections, and does it operate with openness and transparency?

The kingdom's few elected officials have little or no influence over national laws and policies. Corruption remains a significant problem, despite some earlier moves to hold certain officials accountable, and the functioning of government is largely opaque. Following a deadly stampede during the hajj in 2015, which drew international criticism of the infrastructure and safety measures provided by Saudi authorities, the government refused to amend its official death toll of 769, despite estimates by international news organizations that exceeded 2,400.

The Saudi state also remains notably opaque in its financial practices. Although the government generates massive revenue from the sale of oil, which it redistributes through social welfare programs and as patronage, little is known about its accounting or the various direct ways in which the state's wealth becomes a source of private privilege for the royal family and its clients. Anticipating ongoing economic pressure from low global oil prices, Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced his reform plan, Saudi Vision 2030, in April 2016. The strategy is intended to reduce the kingdom's dependence on oil and, in the short term, begin dismantling long-standing elements of the welfare state as part of a push for greater austerity. Saudi Vision 2030, which also sought extensive privatization of government-owned sectors of the economy, to reduce youth unemployment, and to develop new industries, was considered largely aspirational by some analysts. Previous leaders had attempted to introduce similar measures, only to face political blowback and stubborn patterns of corruption. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia agreed to a first round of oil production cuts among global oil producers in late November 2016, with the goal of bolstering prices and generating more revenue.

Additional Discretionary Political Rights Question A 2/4

For traditional monarchies that have no parties or electoral process, does the system provide for genuine, meaningful consultation with the people, encourage public discussion of policy choices, and allow the right to petition the ruler?

1. Is there a non-elected legislature that advises the monarch on policy issues?
2. Are there formal mechanisms for individuals or civic groups to speak with or petition the monarch?
3. Does the monarch take petitions from the public under serious consideration?

In addition to drawing advice from the Consultative Council, the monarchy has a tradition of consulting with select members of Saudi society. However, the process is not equally open to all citizens. From the king to local governors, royal family officials periodically host meetings for citizens to air grievances and seek access to money or power. These meetings are irregular, and

while they afford some citizens rare opportunities to meet with the powerful, the outcomes reinforce the personalized nature of authority.

Civil Liberties

Civil Liberties 7 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief 3 / 16

D1. Are there free and independent media and other forms of cultural expression?

D2. Are religious institutions and communities free to practice their faith and express themselves in public and private?

D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free of extensive political indoctrination?

D4. Is there open and free private discussion?

The government tightly controls domestic media content and dominates regional print and satellite-television coverage, with members of the royal family owning major stakes in news outlets in multiple countries. Government officials have banned journalists and editors who publish articles deemed offensive to the religious establishment or the ruling authorities. A 2011 royal decree amended the press law to criminalize, among other things, any criticism of the country's grand mufti, the Council of Senior Religious Scholars, or government officials; violations can result in fines and forced closure of media outlets.

The regime has taken steps to limit the influence of online media, blocking access to large numbers of websites that are considered immoral or politically sensitive. A 2011 law requires all blogs and websites, or anyone posting news or commentary online, to have a license from the Ministry of Information or face fines and possible closure of the website.

Authorities continue to target writers and activists who use the internet to express their views. In December 2016, Issa al-Nukhaifi, an activist critical of corruption and the government's conduct of the war in Yemen, was arrested for his posts on Twitter.

Islam is the official religion, and all Saudis are required by law to be Muslims. A 2014 royal decree punishes atheism with up to 20 years in prison. The government prohibits the public practice of any religion other than Islam and restricts the religious practices of the Shiite and Sufi Muslim minority sects. The construction of Shiite mosques is constrained through licensing rules and prohibited outside of Eastern Province, where most Shiites live. Although the government recognizes the right of non-Muslims to worship in private, it does not always respect this right in practice.

Online commentary that touches on religion can be harshly punished. In February 2016, a Saudi court sentenced a man to 10 years in prison and 2,000 lashes for embracing atheism in postings on social media. In March, journalist Alaa Brinji was sentenced to five years in prison for insulting the regime and criticizing the country's crackdown on Shiites in Eastern Province.

Academic freedom is restricted, and informers monitor classrooms for compliance with curriculum rules, including a ban on teaching secular philosophy and religions other than Islam. Despite

changes to textbooks in recent years, intolerance in the classroom remains a significant problem, as some educators continue to espouse discriminatory and hateful views of non-Muslims and Muslim minority sects.

Saudis are able to engage in some degree of private discussion on political and other topics, including criticism of certain aspects of government performance, both online and offline. However, severe criminal penalties deter more direct criticism of the regime and free discussion on topics like religion or the royal family.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights 0 / 12

E1. Is there freedom of assembly, demonstration, and open public discussion?

E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations?

E3. Are there free trade unions and peasant organizations or equivalents, and is there effective collective bargaining? Are there free professional and other private organizations?

Freedoms of assembly and association are not upheld. The government frequently detains political activists who stage demonstrations or engage in other civic advocacy. While no massive protests have taken place in the kingdom, smaller demonstrations have become more common. The largest of these occur in Eastern Province. In 2016, protests broke out in the province after prominent Shiite cleric and political dissident Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, who was arrested in 2012 for leading antigovernment demonstrations and calling for an end to sectarian discrimination, was executed in January. His nephew Ali Mohammed al-Nimr, arrested at age 17 in 2012 for participating in protests, also faced execution in 2016, but his sentence had yet to be carried out at year's end.

Saudi Arabia has no associations law and has historically approved licenses only for charitable organizations. No laws protect the rights to form independent labor unions, bargain collectively, or engage in strikes. Workers who engage in union activity are subject to dismissal or imprisonment.

F. Rule of Law 2 / 16

F1. Is there an independent judiciary?

F2. Does the rule of law prevail in civil and criminal matters? Are police under direct civilian control?

F3. Is there protection from political terror, unjustified imprisonment, exile, or torture, whether by groups that support or oppose the system? Is there freedom from war and insurgencies?

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?

The judiciary, which must coordinate its decisions with the executive branch, is not independent. A special commission of judicial experts writes law that serves as the foundation for verdicts in the court system, which is grounded in Sharia (Islamic law). While Saudi courts have historically relied on the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence, the commission incorporates all four Sunni Muslim legal schools in drafting new guidelines.

Defendants' rights are poorly protected by law and not respected in practice. Detainees are often denied access to legal counsel during interrogation, and lengthy pretrial detention and detention without charge are common. Capital punishment, usually carried out by beheading, is applied to a

wide range of crimes; juvenile offenders are not exempt from the penalty. According to international media reports, Saudi authorities carried out more than 150 executions in 2016.

The penal code bans torture, but allegations of torture by police and prison officials are common, and access to prisoners by independent human rights and legal organizations is strictly limited. A sweeping new antiterrorism law, which includes lengthy prison sentences for criticizing the monarchy or the government, went into effect in 2014. Among other provisions, it expanded the power of police to conduct raids against suspected antigovernment activity without judicial approval.

Local affiliates of the Islamic State (IS) militant group carried out several terrorist bombings and bombing attempts in 2016. Attacks on a Shiite mosque in Al-Ahsa in the Eastern Province that killed four people in January were attributed to IS. In July, a suicide bombing in Medina also killed four people. Two other attacks were attempted the same day in the Shiite community of Qatif and near the U.S. consulate in Jeddah. In May, security forces reportedly broke up an IS cell in a suburb of Mecca. Separately, Yemeni rebel forces continued to fire missiles and other ordnance into Saudi territory in 2016, killing small numbers of Saudi civilians.

Substantial prejudice against ethnic, religious, and national minorities prevails. Shiites, who make up 10 to 15 percent of the population, are underrepresented in senior government positions, and Shiite activism has faced repression by security forces. Shiites have also been subject to physical assaults by both state and nonstate actors.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights 2 / 16

G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of travel or choice of residence, employment, or institution of higher education?

G2. Do individuals have the right to own property and establish private businesses? Is private business activity unduly influenced by government officials, the security forces, political parties/organizations, or organized crime?

G3. Are there personal social freedoms, including gender equality, choice of marriage partners, and size of family?

G4. Is there equality of opportunity and the absence of economic exploitation?

Freedom of movement is restricted in some cases. The government punishes activists and critics by limiting their ability to travel outside the country, and reform advocates are routinely stripped of their passports.

While a great deal of business activity is connected to members of the government, the ruling family, or other elite families, officials have given assurances that special industrial and commercial zones are free from interference by the royal family.

Women are not treated as equal members of society, and many laws discriminate against them. They are not permitted to drive cars, despite the advocacy efforts of a civic movement aimed at lifting the ban, and must obtain permission from a male guardian in order to travel within or outside of the country. According to prevailing interpretations of Sharia in Saudi Arabia, daughters generally receive half the inheritance awarded to their brothers, and the testimony of one man is

equal to that of two women. Moreover, Saudi women seeking access to the courts must be represented by a male.

The religious police enforce a strict policy of gender segregation and often harass women, using physical punishment to ensure compliance with conservative standards of dress in public. However, an April 2016 government decree revoked the religious police's authority to pursue or arrest suspects or ask for their identification—meaning they must report alleged violations to regular police instead—and requires them to work only during specified office hours. In December, a Twitter user in Riyadh, Malak al-Shehri, posted a photo of herself on the street without the obligatory hijab or abaya. She was subsequently arrested for “violations of general morals.”

Same-sex marriage is not legal. All sexual activity outside of marriage, including same-sex activity, is criminalized, and the death penalty can be applied in certain circumstances. A 2013 law defines and criminalizes domestic abuse, prescribing fines and up to a year in prison for perpetrators. However, according to analysis by Human Rights Watch, the law lacks clarity on enforcement mechanisms.

Education and economic rights for Saudi women have improved somewhat in recent years. More than half of the country's university students are now female, although they do not enjoy equal access to classes and facilities. Women gained the right to hold commercial licenses in 2004. In 2008, the Saudi Human Rights Commission established a women's branch to investigate cases of human rights violations against women and children, but it has not consistently carried out serious investigations or brought cases against violators.

A 2005 labor law that extended various protections and benefits to previously unregulated categories of workers also banned child labor and established a 75 percent quota for Saudi citizens in each company's workforce, though a series of government policies have since set more modest interim “Saudiization” goals due to the difficulty of reaching such a high target. Foreign workers—of whom there are more than seven million in the country, making up more than half of the active labor force—have historically enjoyed virtually no legal protections and remain vulnerable to trafficking and forced labor, primarily through the exploitation of the visa-sponsorship system. In 2014, the Ministry of Labor ruled that expatriate workers who are not paid their salaries for more than three consecutive months are free to switch their work sponsors without approval. A number of amendments to the labor law that went into effect in 2015 contained broader rights and protections for workers in the private sector. The labor law does not apply to household workers, who remain particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year
