

King Abdullah Cracks the Glass Ceiling - MabuhayRadio

Written by Amina Rasul

Saturday, 21 February 2009 12:07 - Last Updated Saturday, 21 February 2009 12:10

Finally! A woman has been appointed to a ministerial position in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. On February 14, the appointment Norah al-Fayez as deputy education minister for female education affairs was announced. This is the most-senior position granted to woman in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia .

“King Abdullah has given us a Valentine’s day present!” happily proclaimed Aysha Alkusayer to us during the 2009 US-Islamic World Forum in Doha. Aysha represented the Alwaleed bin Talal Foundation of Saudi Arabia at the Doha Forum. One of the young professional Saudi women who are working to empower Saudi women, young professionals and civil society, Aysha told us that young Saudis are very supportive of King Abdulla’s moves to transform Saudi Arabia. In fact, she said, King Abdulla is treated like a rock star, with young Saudis buying his posters to adorn their rooms.

Aysha is one of the rare few Saudi women who have been given to opportunity to work at their profession. A paper circulated at the forum, “The Impact of Oil Wealth on Women in the Middle East”, noted, “There is little doubt that in the Middle East, women lag far behind their counterparts in other regions of the world”. The showed that while women generally do better in the rich countries than the poor ones, “The Middle East is the great exception: even though the region enjoys relatively high incomes, it has fewer women in the work force, and fewer women in parliament, than even South Asia—where incomes are far lower”.

Norah al-Fayez’ appointment, while it does not break the glass ceiling, has created a tiny crack which the forces for reform and liberalization can certainly exploit.

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* I was in Doha for the US-Islamic World Forum from February 13 to 17. Organized by the Saban Center at Brookings and the Government of the State of Qatar, the Doha Forum annually brings together leaders from the U.S. and the Muslim world for "frank dialogue on the key issues affecting their relations". This year, we discussed "Common Challenges," as the Obama Administration has reached out to the Muslim world to move forward, together, towards common solutions to shared problems.

The dialogues at the Forum have focused on security, governance and religion, and human development and social change. This year, a session for Women Leaders was added. As you can imagine, King Abdullah's historic move certainly impressed. Not only did he appoint a woman minister, he also axed Sheikh Ibrahim al-Ghaith as the head of the Muttawa (religious police who strictly enforce Islamic code of conduct such as segregation of unrelated men and women in public places, women to be covered in black robes with only their faces showing). Under Al-Graith, the Muttawa was a feared institution. Al-Graith blocked many liberalization programs in the Kingdom.

King Abdullah's sweeping changes included a cabinet reshuffle and the reorganization of the powerful Grand Ulama Council, which advises the King on religious matters.

The King also removed Sheikh Salih Ibn al-Luhaydan from the judiciary. Last Ramadan, Al-Luhaydan had ruled that it was permissible to execute the owners of satellite television channels broadcasting "immoral" programs. He and Al-Graith have been widely viewed as enemies of reform and modernization.

King Abdullah's sweeping changes included a cabinet reshuffle and the reorganization of the powerful Grand Ulama Council, which advises the King on religious matters. The reorganization will bring in scholars from different branches of Sunni Islam. Traditionally, the Ulama Council members all came from only one school of Islamic jurisprudence (what is referred to as the Wahabbi).

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King Abdullah's initiatives are hailed in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East as moves that will accelerate the pace of reform in the Kingdom as well as bring in new and moderate views into the political system.

Former US Secretary of State Madeline Albright, who spoke at the Doha Forum, must have been just as happy. She spoke of a world where ideas are hard to contain, where the path of dialogue is the right path. She stressed the responsibility of groups (or countries) defending their legitimate group interests without depriving others of their rights. Even the talk of General David Petraeus, Commander of the US Central Command, reflected the shift to dialogue as he spoke of the strengthening of international security by strengthening networks in pursuit of common goals. He mentioned a security architecture that would include a leaders network, information sharing and training networks (designed with multilateral inputs).

With the commitment of the Obama Administration for a common way forward, the developments in Saudi Arabia can usher in a brave new world, where wars can be waged in the arena of ideas and not in bloody Arab streets like Gaza. Where weapons of choice will be carefully argued position papers and not deadly missiles. # # #

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