

Polity IV Country Report 2010: Saudi Arabia

<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%;">Score:</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2009</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2010</td> <td style="width: 15%;">Change</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Polity:</td> <td>-10</td> <td>-10</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Democ:</td> <td>0</td> <td>0</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Autoc:</td> <td>10</td> <td>10</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Durable:</td> <td colspan="3">84</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Tentative:</td> <td colspan="3">No</td> </tr> </table>	Score:	2009	2010	Change	Polity:	-10	-10	0	Democ:	0	0	0	Autoc:	10	10	0	Durable:	84			Tentative:	No			
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SCODE	SAU	CCODE	670	Date of Report	1 June 2011																				
Polity IV Component Variables																									
XRREG	XRCOMP	XROPEN	XCONST	PARREG	PARCOMP																				
3	1	1	1	4	1																				
Date of Most Recent Polity Transition (3 or more point change)																									
End Date			Begin Date																						
			16 January 1926 (Ind.)																						
Polity Fragmentation: No																									
Constitution	1992 (Shari'a law)																								
Executive(s)	King and Prime Minister Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud; ascended to the throne by hereditary succession, 1 August 2005																								
Legislature	No legislature; no political parties. Consultative Council was established by royal decree in December 1993; 150 members, appointed by the king																								
Judiciary	Supreme Council of Justice																								

Narrative Description:¹

Executive Recruitment: *Ascription (1)*

The Saud dynasty has ruled parts of Arabia since the 15th century and proclaimed the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932 after taking control of territories that formerly belonged to the Ottoman Empire. After the death of King Abd Al-Aziz Al Saud who unified the country, the King and Crown Prince were chosen from among his sons, who themselves had preponderant influence in the choice (the rule of Abd Al-Aziz was followed by successive rules of his two sons, first, Khalid and, later, Fahd). A 1992 royal decree reserved for the King exclusive power to name the Crown Prince (direct heir to the throne). In November 1995 King Faud suffered a stroke and his brother, Crown Prince Abdullah, became de facto leader of Saudi Arabia. On 1 August 2005, King Faud died and Crown Prince Abdullah officially ascended to the throne. King Abdullah's brother, Prince Sultan, was named Crown Prince.

In October 2006, King Abdullah moved to formalize the royal succession process in a bid to prevent infighting among the next generation of princes. In an effort to do so, King Abdullah passed a law which established an Allegiance Commission, made up exclusively of heirs to the Saud dynasty, which has been mandated to ensure a smooth transfer of power in the future. Future rulers will have to seek the

¹ The research described in this report was sponsored by the Political Instability Task Force (PITF). The PITF is funded by the Central Intelligence Agency. The views expressed herein are the authors' alone and do not represent the views of the US Government.

approval of the Commission for their choice of crown prince. In the event of a disagreement, the matter would be settled by a vote on the King's choice, or another candidate selected by the Commission. The implication of this reform is that the decision to choose the future ruler of the kingdom will no longer be in the hands of the King alone but in the hands of a group of princes. The new law, however, does not apply to the current king and crown prince.

Executive Constraints: Unlimited Authority (1)

All political power is ultimately vested in the monarch (king). The king is an absolutist ruler whose authority is not restricted by a constitution or a legislature. The right to petition the king directly is a well-established tradition. The king serves as head of state, head of government, and supreme religious leader. The concept of separation of religion and state is not accepted by the government or the public. The king also holds the post of prime minister and appoints and leads a Council of Ministers (Cabinet), which comprises royal family members who advise him on matters of legislative and executive policy. Responding to pressure from his liberal advisors calling for the modernization of Saudi Arabia's political system, Fahd enacted the country's first written rules of governance (which provided for the Consultative Council as a quasi-legislative body) in 1992. Responding to pressure from Islamic fundamentalists seeking an even stricter implementation of Shari'a law, the monarch created a Supreme Council on Islamic Affairs in 1994 which also has powerful advisory influence, together with the Ulema Council, a highly conservative group of Muslim theologians.

The judiciary is generally independent but is subject to influence by the executive branch and members of the royal family. Despite this influence, in recent years the royal family has made an effort to professionalize the judiciary. In October 2007 a royal decree was issued that overhauled the judiciary. This decree mandated the creation of a Supreme Court, and Appeals Court and new general courts to replace the Supreme Judicial Council. Until now, Saudi judges have had wide discretion to issue rulings according to their own interpretation of Sharia law. The judiciary has long resisted the codification of laws and the reliance on precedent when making rulings.

The decision-making process within the royal family is a closed affair, with senior princes discussing issues in private with the aim of reaching a consensus. The informal nature of this process was given some formal structure in 2000 with the formation of a family council chaired by then-Crown Prince Abdullah and comprising 18 princes. While political decisions affecting daily life are taken by the Council of Ministers (cabinet), the royal family is strongly represented, holding many of the senior cabinet portfolios.

Political Participation: Repressed Competition (1)

There are no elections and no political parties in Saudi Arabia. The polity is institutionally closed, and the regime has both the capacity and the willingness to suppress opposition activities and even views. Strict implementation of the Shari'a laws prohibits or restricts freedom of speech, the press, assembly, and association. In October 2003, the government announced that elections would be held for half of the seats of 14 municipal councils. Many observers saw the move as an attempt to appease Western critics, though the government has been under internal pressure from liberals and intellectuals to make political reforms. In February 2005 the first ever municipal election were held in Saudi Arabia. A total of 592 seats in 178 municipal councils were contested. Only one-half of the municipal councils were selected by popular vote and women were not permitted to take part in the electoral process. Only 25% of the eligible voters registered to vote. Also in October 2003, the first human rights conference was held in the kingdom. In March 2004, the country's first human rights watchdog organization, the National Human Rights Association (NHRA) was formed to receive citizens' complaints on human rights and work to ensure the kingdom's compliance with international agreement. Contributing to the deterioration of human rights in Saudi Arabia in recent years has been the Government's efforts to wipe out Islamist terrorist networks inside its borders. The Government has been battling militants linked to al-Qaeda since a wave of bombings and shootings in 2003. The attacks in 2003 and since have claimed the lives of nearly 300 security personnel, militants and Saudi civilians.