

## Saudi women set to drive in protest – and to show their rising clout

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By Max Fisher October 25, 2013

Women's rights activists in Saudi Arabia will get behind the wheel en masse on Saturday to protest their government's refusal to allow women to have driver's licenses -- a demonstration that comes just over two years after a similar push. While the earlier effort was not successful, it did kick-start some very slow progress on women's rights, setting the stage for this weekend's demonstration. The story of how Saudi women got from the 2011 driving protest to this one hints at how far they've come and how far they have yet to go.

Saudi Arabian women are subject to some of the most severe legal restrictions in the world, of which the de facto driving ban is perhaps the best-known -- and it has become the focus of a campaign by Saudi women for broader rights. The campaign has grown dramatically since it began, in May 2011, with a single drive. A 32-year-old information technology consultant named Manal al-Sharif was filmed by women's rights activist Wajeha al-Huwaider driving around and reeling off arguments for dropping the ban. The two posted the video to YouTube, and police arrested Sharif the next day, charging her with disturbing public order.

Sharif was released after a week in prison, but that video, and her passionate message, had already spread among the country's increasingly well-educated and well-connected women. (A similar campaign in 1990 was limited to just 47 female drivers in one city and fizzled quickly.) Although the driving ban and other restrictions both formal and informal can make it difficult for Saudi women to meet and organize, the growing prevalence of social media allowed like-minded women to connect online. A grass-roots campaign organized via a Facebook page called "Women2Drive" urged women to get behind the wheel on June 17, 2011. Dozens did, flooding social media sites with photos and videos of their law-breaking drives.

At first, many of the drivers went unpunished or were openly tolerated. But as Saudi Arabia's influential community of conservative clerics called on the government to crack down, authorities arrested enough of the women to cast a chill over the movement. One such woman, Shaima Jastaniah, was [sentenced to 10 lashes](#) -- but the penalty was delayed repeatedly and, almost a year later, finally dropped.

The campaign was among the few instances of the 2011 Arab Spring movements penetrating Saudi Arabia and was marked by many of the same forces: organizing over social media, peaceful public demonstrations and an apparently spontaneous desire to demand greater rights. Its goals were significantly more modest than those in Egypt or Tunisia, but it's also seen some real successes.

The Saudi ruling family, though it did nothing to change the country's driving laws, did bend on other women's rights issues. About a week after the June 2011 demonstration, King Abdullah [announced](#) that women would be permitted to vote and to run in municipal elections starting in 2015. He also announced that women would be allowed to join the Shoura Council, an unelected and relatively weak, but still highly visible, national decision-making body, starting in 2013. Other milestones of modest progress followed: In October of that year, women were [permitted to join the boards](#) of the country's nonpolitical but culturally influential literary clubs for the first time. Last summer, Saudi Arabia sent its first ever female Olympic athletes, a runner and a judo fighter, to [compete in London](#).

Perhaps the most significant step came this January, when women first joined the Shoura Council, where they now hold one in five seats. Almost immediately, many of the council's women [announced](#) they would use their new platform to push for driving rights for women, despite heavy criticism from conservative religious figures. About a month ago, several introduced a formal recommendation to lift the ban -- just after women's rights activists had launched a [Web site](#) calling for this Saturday's driving protest. Though Saudi authorities quickly blocked the site, a petition on the page drew 14,000 signatures -- far more attention than the 2011 "Women2Drive" movement had generated, and perhaps helped by the council members' campaign.

Saudi Arabia's ultimate authority, the royal family, has shown little sign of softening on the driving ban, despite Abdullah's [2005 pledge](#) to journalist Barbara Walters that it would be lifted at some point. Still, the fact that Saturday's mass drive is happening at all, so soon after the 2011 movement, is a sign of how emboldened women's rights activists have become. That sense of empowerment, after all, is a victory in itself -- and a direct product of the successes won last time around, both on the road and off it.