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Saudi female scientist raises hopes for women in politics



With a PhD in biotechnology from Britain's Cambridge University and a recurring presence on many of the world's most influential females lists, medical scientist Hayat Sindi is no stranger to breaking away from the typical Saudi female mould.

In February, Sindi broke down yet another of Saudi Arabia's gender barriers when she became one of the first women to be sworn into the Shura Council in the ultra-conservative kingdom.

Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah first announced that women would join the unelected 150-member body, which functions like a parliament but without formal powers, in 2011.

But women were only formally appointed in January this year after the king formally decreed that women should always hold at least 20 percent of the seats.

"The absence of women in the past from the Shura Council made people unaware of a particular viewpoint [of women] because she [the woman] lives the problems or through certain situations that no-one else can understand. The king's decision [to appoint women to the Shura Council] is the best thing that happened to Saudi women since education by giving women a position and a mandate and by showing a truer picture of the natural society in which both men and women have a voice," said 46-year-old Hayat Sindi, one of the first women to be made a member of the Shura Council.

In his 2011 decree, King Abdullah also said women would be able to vote and stand for office in the municipal polls.

The decision to appoint women to the Shura Council prompted a protest by dozens of conservative clerics outside the royal court in January, however, Sindi spoke positively about her experience of men's reaction to her appointment.

“Many of my male colleagues are very happy with our presence in the Shura Council, because we really do look at things in a different way and put forward another point of view,” Sindi explained.

The Shura Council, composed mostly of academics, clerics, businessmen and former civil servants, has had 12 women “advisers” since 2006 and some saw the new legal requirement for female council members as a testament to the king's push for modest social change in the religious Gulf state.

“Certainly our presence in the Shura Council will have a great impact in favor of women in various fields, but, in relation to women driving cars, this is still a big discussion. When this will be achieved depends on society and on having a suitable environment,” said Sindi before going on to “promise Saudi women that things always get better...like in any country in the world, we need a mix of all segments of society in order to move forward for the better.”

A native of Mecca, one of Islam's holiest cities, Sindi graduated with a degree in pharmacology from British university, King's College London in 1995 before completing her doctorate in biotechnology from Cambridge University in 2001.

Sindi divides her times between being a visiting scholar at Harvard University in the United States, and working as a medical researcher and inventor in Saudi Arabia.

“I think I was chosen because of my role in society. All the research I have done and the sciences that I studied and still study and teach, is about how we can use science to serve society. My innovations were about how I could help the needy and the deprived or to diagnose incurable diseases,” she said.

While at Cambridge Sindi invented the Magnetic Acoustic Resonator Sensor (MARS), a machine that combines the effects of light and ultra-sound to accurately choose suitable medications to deal with different cancers. She is often considered a role model for aspirational Arab women and has made it on to Arabian Business's lists for the World's Most Influential Arabs in 2012 and named one of Newsweek's “150 Women Who Shake the World” in the same year.

“My appearances in the external media also made them consider me because I was associated with both religion and science and so I was looked at as a role model for school boys and girls on how dreams can become a reality,” added Sindi.

Liberals in the Gulf Arab state say Abdullah, who became king in 2005 after effectively ruling as crown prince for a decade before that, has pushed for modest social change, calling for women to have more opportunities to work.

At a press conference in Riyadh last month, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry applauded the Saudi government's reforms at promoting “greater economic opportunity for women,” adding: “We encourage further inclusive reforms to insure that all citizens of the kingdom ultimately enjoy their basic rights and