

RELEASE IN PART B6

From: Anne-Marie Slaughter <[redacted]>
Sent: Saturday, May 28, 2011 1:04 PM
To: H
Cc: Abedin, Huma; Mills, Cheryl D; Sullivan, Jacob J
Subject: reactions from Saudi public -- including lots of women -- on imprisonment of Manal al-Sharif

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I thought you might be interested in this column by a Saudi columnist printed in The Gulf News collecting reactions from Saudi Arabia on her imprisonment. Note that several make the argument that Saudi Arabia will never really develop as long as it can't harness the energies of half its population. Best, AM

Many Saudis and have formed definite opinions on the case of Manal Al Sharif, the Saudi woman currently imprisoned for driving her vehicle on Saudi roads. Opinions range from surprise to distress at the incarceration on vague charges of the divorced woman.

Esmail, a Jeddah resident, says, "I seriously do not know why women cannot drive in Saudi Arabia, especially if they want to and ask for it. The ban has nothing to do with Islam; traffic law enforcement may need some changes to handle female drivers. However, change can not be enforced with a date and slogans; we have to remember and respect the views of the majority of our nation that support no driving for women and work around it."

Nadia, also from Jeddah, adds: "This is an ongoing problem that never seems to get resolved for some reason or other. It is time that we address these issues. The financial strain that having a driver entails is more than what a lot of people can afford.

"The other issue is the strain that is put on the male members of a family. How can they perform their jobs if they need to chauffeur their children and female members of the family to and from work or schools? As long as we remain in this status quo concerning women, the country will never advance to join the rest of the world. Should we not address these issues of GREAT concern so that we can move forward instead of locking women away and pretending that they are not even there? Out of sight, out of mind!"

Leila says: "Manal Al Sharif and others like her are paving the way to eradicating caveman rules that have suppressed the women of KSA [Kingdom of Saudi Arabia] for so long. She is an idol and will be regarded as a hero to so many — especially to me! Bravo to all you women who have the guts to take this step and good luck on June 17! And BRAVO to all the men who stand behind this and support their mothers, wives, daughters, sisters and every fellow female citizen who is appealing for this basic right! "

Lina A. admits: "I knew it [Manal's driving] was not going to get us anywhere. The government does not work that way at all. Yes I thought it was a bold move, but I knew that there wouldn't be any activation to the driving laws. Or whatever decision. So I didn't want to raise hopes. And I was right."

Majid from Riyadh: "I fully support women driving, as I would rather have my wife drive herself to work rather than her needing the assistance of a strange man from a strange country, who is not the best of drivers. I also wish we could get past this issue and focus more attention on issues that are vital to the prosperity of our society, like education, environmental issues, poverty, unemployment, innovation, productivity, and many more."

Mohammad says: "Simply put, she was another idiot that was behind the wheel. Just because she got some press coverage doesn't mean she'll help the issue and they'll approve the issue tomorrow. Just to get people used to seeing women behind the wheel will cause a need to create newer laws and regulations to manage all aspects such as harassment when driving and prison terms for offenders of traffic rules for men and women alike."

Going forward

Kamal: "I am waiting for the day that I will see the women drive in my country. I know for sure that we will have big opposition from old minds and clerics, but this will not stop us from going forward. Just wish to see it happen before I die. Women driving will have some negative side initially just like any other change [TV, radio, internet, phones, etc] but the positive is far more attractive."

Rana from the Eastern province: "I believe what she did was totally wrong as she failed to comply with the country's policies and regulations. However, the consequences were much greater than the guilt."

Abeer from Riyadh: "Manal has become the Rosa Parks of Saudi Arabia! Her arrest shows why our nation will never excel. When you automatically toss aside 50 per cent+ of your talent pool, nothing good can result."

Yousuf from Dammam adds: "I am distressed. I thought the country was moving forward. What actually is transpiring is a step backwards towards intolerance and the continued subjugation of women's rights."

Saeed from Dhahran adds: "This is not about anything except the right of choice. Why should women be denied that, and on what basis? We have already determined that Islam does not prevent women from driving. Then what is it? Let them choose. And the government should support the movement by amending their laws."

On the basis of such public opinion, and the international condemnation that has followed the arrest, it is puzzling that the lady in question has had her imprisonment extended by another ten days. That too while her five-year-old son had to be hospitalised for an infection. Does that augur well for progress?

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