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Subject :

The royal decree, announced by the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz, allowing Saudi women to drive from June 2018 is a revolutionary decision. It has various social, economic, and political significance, especially amid the economic and social modernization waves the Kingdom has witnessed in recent years and Saudi Vision 2030, which focuses on economic and social empowerment of women. Women's Empowerment The decision to allow women to drive cars in Saudi Arabia can be regarded as huge leap in terms of its symbolic significances and impact on the regional and global image of the Kingdom. Allowing Saudi women to drive has always been a subject of great controversy regionally and internationally, due to its association with multiple religious, social, and ideological dimensions. There have been various calls by many personalities and institutions domestically and abroad to grant women this right. This means that the move was not a complete surprise to those who follow Saudi affairs. The pace of decisions that promote the role of women and their presence picked up significantly in recent times. In 2007, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz appointed Princess Al Jawhara bint Fahd bint Mohamed Al Saud director of Princess Nourah bin Abdulrahman University. In 2009, Norah Al-Fayez was appointed Deputy Minister of Education in charge of women's affairs. Al-Fayez is the first Saudi female to hold a "cabinet-level" position in Saudi Arabia. Prior to those decrees, six females were appointed in 2005 as full-time advisors in Shura Council. In 2011, Saudi women got the right to vote and stand for municipal councils' elections, which came into effect during the reign of King Salman in December 2015. An additional gesture occurred in September, when women were allowed for the first time to attend celebrations in sports stadium during the National Day. Women's empowerment continued to gather momentum as King Salman assumed power, and manifested by the efforts of Prince Mohamed bin Salman. According to these efforts, Saudi women present a significant pillar of the Saudi Vision 2030. Multiple Impacts The most significant implications/ impacts of the decision to allow women to drive in Saudi Arabia are as follows: 1- Strengthening the international image of Saudi Arabia: The decree was widely welcomed in the United States and European countries, which solidified the position of the pro-Saudi figures and entities within the Western decision-making circles. Moreover, it has clearly contributed to enhancing the image of the Kingdom, especially on issues of fundamental freedoms guaranteed by the Saudi Arabia. Signs of this welcome were clear in the supportive position of the US Department of State and the positive media coverage in prominent newspapers and news outlets such as New York Times and Washington Post. 2- Cut the costs of transportation economics: Primary indicators point out that the decision will have several economic gains, including reducing the number of foreign drivers, saving their salaries for Saudi families. It will allow cutting the expenses of recruitment, issuance of visas, residence permits, and lodging. Data indicates that Saudi families spend over SAR 25 billion per annum in salaries for foreign drivers, where there are about 1.3 million drivers, according to the statistical bulletin for the labour market in the Kingdom during the first quarter of 2017. 3- Widen the participation of women in labor market: The decree provides greater opportunities and wider participation of women in the labor market. Women driving is one of the major obstacles facing women, and thus limits the chance of women's contribution to national development. Accordingly, the move will contribute to the implementation of Saudi Vision 2030 through wider participation of women in the labor market. One need to note that Saudi women represent approximately 49.6 percent of university graduates in the Kingdom, while they accounted for only 16 percent of the workforce. 4- Boost the demand for cars: The decree will have positive impacts on auto sales and insurance companies because they will get the lion's share of the benefits of this decree. When the decree comes into effect mid next year, there will be a massive demand for the auto sector and the associated insurance sector. 5- Support social transformations: Social openness is indispensable for the new Saudi 2030 vision, where tourism, services and entertainment sectors occupy central place. The recent decision will boost social freedoms and project an image to the outside world that a significant societal shift is happening in Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom's plans to develop resorts in 50 islands off the coast of the Red Sea were met with skepticism concerning the ability of these projects to cope with the social reservations; hence, this decision serves as a first step along the way to the necessary guarantees. Additionally, allowing women to drive cars will necessarily herald considerable social changes in lifestyle, in terms of increasing their social presence and role. It as well prepares the community to accept further changes. Positive social outcomes will likely help convince those who have reservations concerning the decision, and reduce some crime threats, such as kidnapping, violence against children, that may be committed by some expat drivers. Confronting Radical Voices Although Saudi Arabia has witnessed in the recent years moves towards social openness, the importance of the new step lies in the Kingdom's continuous community modernization and opening trends. In addition, it sends clear messages to the religious agitators through taking measures against radical Islamic figures, asserting that the Kingdom will firmly confront any attempts of extremism incitement. The official religious establishment in the Kingdom endorsed the decision through the statement of the Senior Council of Ulema, which underlines that "The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques decides the interest of his country and people in line with Sharia". However, it is expected to witness a movement of religious figures who oppose the decision because of their previous fatwas (religious decrees), in which they rejected allowing women to drive. Under a religious banner, radical groups and terrorist organizations will try to exploit the decision to attract the discontent and naysayers, inciting them against the policies of Saudi Arabia. For its part, the Saudi government will likely confront violators and opponents of the decision, along with augmenting policies to combat extremism through national institutions. In conclusion, the recent decision can be read as an implementation of a "top-down reform" approach, which is a feature that characterizes the Saudi regime in many of its policies. The Saudi leadership promotes modernization and development trends and extends the community freedoms' margins through royal decrees. More importantly, the decision is conclusive proof that the Kingdom is undergoing rapid and decisive sweeping transformations. It seems that the decision will be followed by further moves to widen social freedoms and reinforce the efforts of King Salman and his Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman to project a model for Saudi Arabia that is regionally and globally appealing.