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Influence of Government Protections on Social Movements: A Comparison of Women's Rights Movements in the United States and Saudi Arabia

The ability for social movements to make lasting political change relies on three factors: the organization of large groups of people with a common goal, the rigidity of laws, and the potential for protest. Differences in the government and laws of the United States and Saudi Arabia in these areas have greatly impacted the development of social movements, especially the women's rights movement. While American women gained the right to vote in 1920 and have been making steady progress in women's rights since, the movement in Saudi Arabia has been much more gradual. The first elections in which Saudi women were allowed to vote were in 2015 (Dickinson). Other rights, such as driving a car or traveling without a male guardian, are still being fought for.

Often, organizing people to participate in a movement involves widespread communication through the media. The use of media--such as feminist newspapers-- contributed to the popular support of the American women's rights movement in the mid-1800s. *Lily*, the first U.S. newspaper published and owned by a woman, distributed the central ideas of the suffrage movement and how the readers could take action (Johnson). Freedom of the press, a 1st Amendment right in the U.S. Constitution, allowed the women's rights movement to gather supporters across the country through media. In contrast, because Saudi Arabia's government

censors domestic content as well as regional television, print, and social media, it is more difficult to spread support for a cause. Criticism of government officials is criminal and punished with a fine or forced closure of a news outlet (Freedom House). With these restrictions on exchanging ideas, activists such as Loujain al-Hathloul have faced hardships in trying to spread the message of the movement. Loujain al-Hathloul was imprisoned and tortured from 2018 through 2020 for petitioning the Saudi government and advocating for women's right to drive (Tanis). Without the freedom of dissent, people are unable to hear the message of a social movement, and often do not participate based on fear of harsh retaliation from the government. However, when media is available, people can spread new ideas and methods of political and social action.

Another factor of the success of social movements is the ability for laws to change. The process of altering or replacing laws in the United States is much easier than in Saudi Arabia. For example, the U.S. government can amend the Constitution to appease reform movements, like providing women the right to vote with the 19th amendment. The Basic Law of Saudi Arabia serves as a constitution outlining the legislative process; however, laws are worded vaguely, allowing for a wider interpretation of what constitutes a crime. The King of Saudi Arabia has complete authority over the legislative body, meaning that all laws must obtain approval of the monarch and he appoints all judges and major government officials (Freedom House). In 2009, the former King Abdullah appointed the first female minister, but King Salman removed her in 2019, demonstrating that in an absolute monarchy like that of Saudi Arabia, progress of social movements is highly dependent upon who is in power (Naar). The women's rights movement in the United States made steady advancements regardless of the president at the time, because the various checks and balances of the U.S. government ensure that one person's opinion cannot

have an overdue influence on the institution or enforcement of policy. Saudi Arabia also lacks the written codes for judicial procedures or due process that are present in the United States. Consequently, activists of the women's rights movement face trials and sentences dependent upon the judges' discretion. Without the security of due process and a speedy trial given in the 5th and 6th constitutional amendments, Saudi Arabian women are often detained for long periods of time without trial for protesting. Reformists have commonly reported torture from the government, whereas in the United States, the 8th amendment protects people from "cruel and unusual punishment".

Civil disobedience and protest of the government are key aspects of social movements. In the United States, "picketing" was a popular form of advocating for women's suffrage in the 1800s. The protection of citizens' rights to assemble peacefully and petition the government in the Bill of Rights allowed for these revolutionary marches to take place. Conversely, active protest is often not a viable option for Saudi Arabian women because petitions and protests against the government are criminal and severely punished. In some cases, reform advocates, along with their families, are barred from leaving the country (Dickinson). The laws of Saudi Arabia also create barriers for women's opportunities to be independent and participate in social movements. Women were only recently offered the chance to drive, and in 2019, they were allowed to file for a passport without a male guardian's permission. Harshly punishing prominent activists like Loujain al-Hathloul who defy laws against protests, discourages others from participating in social movements.

Altogether, the laws and practices of countries' governments have profound impacts on social movements. The United States women's rights movement has made vast progress towards equality, which can be attributed in part to the numerous freedoms protected by the U.S.

Constitution and its Bill of Rights. In contrast, the movement for the rights of women in Saudi Arabia has been lagging and difficult because of the barriers to certain freedoms: press, speech, due process, petition, and assembly. The feminists of the United States were able to achieve success because they had the freedom of press, so they could reach people across the country; the freedom of petition and right to assembly, so they could protest and call for changes in laws; and the protections of due process and freedom from cruel punishments, so they could dissent without fear. Overall, the laws and processes of the United States and Saudi Arabia have shaped where their social movements stand today and how they will progress in the future.

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