

DOUBLE VISION: PROMISES VS. REALITY IN MOHAMMED BIN SALMAN'S SAUDI ARABIA



April 2021

Since his 2015 appointment as a key advisor to the King, and now as Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has promised a number of economic and social reforms to modernize the Kingdom. Although some of his pledges have been realized, others have not, and many of the crown prince's initiatives fall far short of granting Saudis their most basic rights and freedoms.



WOMEN'S RIGHTS

PROMISE: Allow women to [drive](#).

REALITY: As of [June 2018](#), Saudi women are permitted to drive cars, but required lessons [cost](#) six times more than for men, have long wait times, and are unavailable outside main cities. Saudis who campaigned peacefully for women's right to drive have been [jailed](#), some assaulted and tortured in detention, and put on trial on trumped-up charges. Some have been conditionally [released](#) but are banned from travel and from speaking about their cases.

PROMISE: Ease male guardianship laws to [grant women greater independence](#).

REALITY: As of August 2019, Saudi women can [travel abroad](#), obtain family documents, and make some personal medical decisions without their guardians' permission. But women still need approval to marry, divorce, obtain child custody, receive alimony, and leave detention and domestic violence shelters. Guardians can also [file claims](#) of "disobedience" against women for acts as minor as leaving the house.

PROMISE: Promote [gender equality in the workforce](#).

REALITY: The government has lifted some restrictions on what jobs women can hold. But the unemployment rate for women is [five times higher](#) than for men, and the wage gap may be as high as 56 percent in some positions.



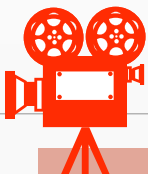
RELIGIOUS REFORM

PROMISE: Curtail the [religious police](#).

REALITY: Since April 2016, religious police no longer have the power to arrest those whom they deem in public violation of "Islamic values." However, police continue [online surveillance](#) of citizens for "moral decay," and public decency laws give authorities significant power to police public behavior. For example, under a [vague law](#) enacted in September 2019, men and women can be detained for dress code violations or dancing in public. Businesses reportedly have been [punished](#) for allowing women to hold jobs that "offend" public decency.

PROMISE: [Promote](#) "moderate Islam" and "tolerance" and "combat extremist thought."

REALITY: Authorities have lifted certain [restrictions](#) on behavior long backed by religious ultra-conservatives (see above). But these reforms have not extended to respect for [religious minorities](#), and public political dissent from religious figures is rarely permitted. In addition, the crown prince has appointed confidants such as **Saud al-Mojeb**—who, as attorney general, spearheaded the [detentions of human rights defenders](#)—to serve on the Council of Senior Scholars, the Kingdom's highest religious body. Meanwhile, prominent [clerics](#) outside the establishment who have advocated for greater religious tolerance, such as **Salman al-Ouda**, have been [imprisoned](#).



ENTERTAINMENT

PROMISE: Expand [access to movies and other entertainment](#).

REALITY: Since 2017, the Kingdom has hosted [concerts](#) and [sporting events](#) with international celebrities and athletes and the ban on movie theaters has been lifted. The first [amusement park](#) is scheduled to open in 2023. Yet [censorship](#) continues to severely restrict the content available inside the Kingdom.



ECONOMIC REFORM

PROMISE: Boost investment, especially from foreign sources, to **diversify the economy** away from dependence on oil.

REALITY: The government set a goal of signing 14 **public-private partnership agreements** by 2020, but completed only seven. Foreign direct investment in 2020 **reached** \$5.5 billion, an increase from recent years, but still roughly half of the \$10 billion target. The detention of prominent businessmen and the assassination of **Jamal Khashoggi** also **deterred** international investors from engaging with the Kingdom, although many have **resumed** cooperation. In addition, in what some observers call **“corporate bullying”** the Saudi government **announced** that beginning in 2024, it will refuse to sign contracts with international companies unless their regional headquarters are located in the Kingdom.

PROMISE: Reform the **kafala system**.

REALITY: In November 2020, the government **announced** changes to the kafala, or sponsorship, system for foreign workers, allowing them to change jobs or to exit the country without their employers’ consent. But private employers still have control over employees’ entrance and residency permits, and the reforms announced do not apply to foreign domestic workers in the Kingdom.

PROMISE: Build a \$500 billion megacity, **Neom**, to attract investment and create jobs.

REALITY: The project’s first phase is scheduled to be completed by 2025, and work is **proceeding** despite the coronavirus pandemic. But few multinational companies have joined so far. Official statements **suggest** that robots may outnumber human workers in the city, casting doubt on job creation potential. The authorities have **pushed residents out** of land planned for Neom, killing at least one person.

PROMISE: Raise \$100 billion for the **Public Investment Fund** by selling public shares of Saudi Aramco.

REALITY: After Aramco was unwilling to meet financial transparency requirements for an international IPO, in December 2019 the Saudi government **listed** the company on the national stock exchange and **pressured** Saudi citizens to invest. The \$26 billion raised in the initial listing fell far short of the original \$100 billion target and **did not include the anticipated level** of foreign investment.



PENAL REFORM

PROMISE: Reduce the overall number of **executions and offenses punishable by death** and minimize other forms of abusive punishment.

REALITY: In 2019, Saudi Arabia **executed** more than 180 people, a record high for the Kingdom and the third highest number in the world. There were fewer executions in 2020, but this may have been due to the COVID-19 **pandemic** rather than a shift in policy. The death penalty is still used to **punish** peaceful dissent and for nonviolent crimes. “Confessions” are often **extracted** through torture and the judicial process for convictions and sentencing is opaque. In addition, the Saudi government utilizes extrajudicial killings and abductions to target perceived opponents, such as the journalist **Jamal Khashoggi**. In April 2020, flogging was **abolished** as a punishment for some criminal offenses, but not all.

PROMISE: Abolish the death penalty for **crimes committed by minors**.

REALITY: This initiative does not apply to all categories of crimes, but **only** to a lesser category of offenses. In addition, the initiative was not rolled out according to standard practice and there are **inconsistencies in Saudi government claims** about the initiative’s actual implementation. Indeed, a number of defendants convicted of crimes committed while minors still face **risk** of execution.



ANTI-CORRUPTION

PROMISE: Crack down on **corruption**.

REALITY: In a 2017 shakedown, the government **compelled** some 400 royals, top businessmen, and other elites to turn over more than \$100 billion in assets to the state without transparent investigations or due process. The shakedown involved forcible detentions and reported **torture** and at least one **suspicious death**. Meanwhile, there have been no institutional reforms to increase transparency, nor any scrutiny or accountability for the **finances of the crown prince** or his political allies.