

Why a Saudi woman's miniskirt sparked outcry

By AYA BATRAWY
Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — A short video of a Saudi woman walking around in a miniskirt and crop top sparked an outcry after going viral, leading to the woman being detained for several hours.

The woman was eventually released without charge, but the incident and the online debate it ignited point to the tension in Saudi Arabia between proponents of its conservative, state-enforced religious strictures and those pushing for greater rights.

Here's a look at why the video caused such an uproar.

The shock

The woman, whose name has not been released, defied the kingdom's conservative dress code, which requires all women, even foreigners, to wear long, loose robes known as abayas in public.

Most Saudi women also cover their hair and face with black veils.

It is common in Saudi Arabia to see heavily blurred or pixelated images of women's faces on billboards and storefronts — in stark contrast to the many towering images of senior male royals displayed across the country.

In some segments of society, even uttering a woman's name in public is taboo.

High-level foreign dignitaries have been the exception to the rule. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, American first lady Melania Trump and the president's daughter, Ivanka, did not cover their hair or wear abayas on official visits to Saudi Arabia this year, though they did dress modestly.

Last December another Saudi woman posted a picture of herself in public without the abaya on, but she was wearing a black coat and a long, colorful skirt.

She was detained and interrogated for five days. Her current legal status is unclear.

A deeply conservative country

Saudi Arabia is a deeply conservative country that is governed by an austere interpretation of Islam widely known as Wahhabism, which draws heavily on the kingdom's tribal and patriarchal customs.

The country is home to Islam's holiest sites in Mecca and Medina, which draw millions of Muslims around the world for pilgrimage.

The kingdom is ruled by a monarch whose power is rooted in the support of influential Wahhabi clerics. Saudi judges also adhere to conservative interpretations of the faith.

Other countries are governed by Islamic law, but none enforce the Saudi government's strict interpretation of it. Foreign women wear bathing suits on public beaches in nearby Dubai,



In this 2014 file photo, a Saudi woman seen through a heart-shaped statue walks along an inlet of the Red Sea in Jiddah, Saudi Arabia.

AP Photo/Hasan Jamali, File

and can be seen in jeans and shorter dresses at malls in Kuwait and Qatar. In Iran, and among ultraorthodox Jews in Israel, women are required to dress modestly.

Gender segregation

Cafes and restaurants in Saudi Arabia are typically gender-segregated, requiring women to enter through separate doors and be seated out of view of single men.

It remains illegal for women to drive in Saudi Arabia. Women also need the consent of a male relative, usually a father or husband, before they are allowed to travel abroad or obtain a passport.

Despite some openings for women in recent years, clerics in Saudi Arabia have spoken out against women driving and against women working jobs where they might interact with unrelated males.

Most universities and schools are segregated by gender.

Most Saudi women who do work are in teaching jobs, though women have also run in local elections and hold posts in the country's top consultative body, the Shura Council.

The religious police

Saudi Arabia curbed the powers of the religious police last year.

The all-male force can no longer make arrests or pursue people in car chases, though they still patrol the streets and public places ensuring unrelated men and women are not mingling.

The religious police, officially known as the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, ensure that both women and men are dressed modestly.

Men can run afoul of the rules by wearing shorts that stop above the knee or by sporting long or outlandish hairstyles.

After the miniskirt video surfaced, the religious police referred the case to other agencies to investigate it. The woman was questioned by security officials in Riyadh.

Openings

Last month, the king named his son as heir to the throne. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, 31, has spearheaded a Vision 2030 plan to overhaul the country, including modernizing aspects of society.

Also last month, King Salman announced that public prosecution powers would be moved from under the interior minister's purview to that of the royal court, directly under the monarch. A new attorney general was also named in the reshuffling.

As part of Vision 2030, the government has pushed for there to be more entertainment for youth, allowing musical concerts that were once banned and even a Comic-Con event.

The kingdom announced last week that girls would be allowed for the first time to play sports in public school and have access to physical education classes.

Idaho professor fired after showing LGBT support on Facebook

REXBURG, Idaho — A former Brigham Young University-Idaho professor said she was fired after posting a critical view of the Mormon church's policies against same-sex couples on Facebook.

Former political science professor and LDS church member Ruthie Robertson, 22, wrote a lengthy Facebook post on June 5 in favor of equal rights for the LGBT community during Pride Month. The post also addressed the church's opposition to same-sex relationships and legalized same-sex marriage.

"This is my official announcement and declaration that I believe heterosexuality and homosexuality

are both natural and neither is sinful," Robertson wrote. "I will never support the phrase 'love the sinner, hate the sin' because that 'sin' is part of who that person is."

Robertson's post was private, meaning it was only sent to her Facebook friends' timelines, but later that day she got phone call letting her know that she had been reported to university administration.

University administrators met with her to understand her views and hoped that she would reconsider her stance and take down the post, according to Robertson. Robertson edited the post, but refused to delete it.

Because Robertson was not a tenured professor, there was no required due process before she was fired and as a private university owned and operated by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, there is no law that prevents a professor from being fired for expressing opinions that go against the church's policies.

"I was really bummed out because of how much I love my students, and how much of a change I could see in them," she told the *Salt Lake Tribune*. "I was also really stressed out because it was my sole income. But at the same time, I was angry — I was upset they would fire me over something

like this. I was kind of indignant. I wasn't going to back down."

Robertson graduated from the university in April 2016 and began teaching online courses for the university in January. She taught her final class at the school's Rexburg, Idaho campus on Tuesday.

Robertson was previously under contract to teach again during the fall semester and was told her contract would be renewed for 2018.

University spokesman Brett Crandall told the *Post Register* that officials declined to comment and cited a "long-standing policy of not commenting on personnel matters."

BRIEFLY

Bible school creates purpose

PENDLETON — Kids are invited to attend the Maker Fun Factory vacation Bible school. With a theme of "Created by God: Built for a Purpose," kids ages 5 through 12 are invited to attend. The event runs Monday, July 24 through Friday, July 28 from 6-8 p.m. at the Pendleton Seventh-day Adventist Church, 1401 S.W. Goodwin Place. Parents can register their children in advance at www.vbspro.events. Also, walk-in registrations are accepted. For more information, call 541-276-0882.

Kids Club meets weekly

HERMISTON — Area youths are invited to participate in the weekly Kids Club at the Hermiston Christian Center. The weekly event features everything from games, sports and outdoor activities to puppets, music and prizes. Open to ages 5-12, the Kids Club meets each Wednesday from 6:30-8 p.m. at the Hermiston Christian Center, 1825 W. Highland Ave. Children of all faiths are invited to attend. In addition, transportation can be arranged. For more information, contact Joanna Hayden at joanna.3056@gmail.com or 541-561-5573.

Ascension camp offers Solar Eclipse Experience

COVE — Situated north of the path of totality for the Aug. 21 solar eclipse, the Ascension Camp & Conference Center is looking at hosting people as a fundraiser for the camp. The Solar Eclipse Experience will feature lodging (cabins, recreational vehicle sites or tent camping) and meals for guests. The camp is working out details to provide a program that will include star gazing and astronomical study. In addition, there will be opportunities for worship and spiritual meditation. A ministry of the Episcopal Diocese of Eastern Oregon, the camp is nestled in the foothills of the Wallowa Mountains. For more information, including costs of the solar event, call 541-568-4514. For more about the camp facilities, visit www.coveascensionschool.com.

Friday's faith page features local, national and international faith-related news. Send information about local faith-related news and events, including concerts, special speakers and activities to community@eastoregonian.com or drop off to the attention of Tammy Malgesini at 333 E. Main St., Hermiston or Renee Struthers at 211 S.E. Byers Ave., Pendleton. Call 541-564-4539 or 541-966-0818 with questions.

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