



Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice

The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) is the Saudi agency tasked with monitoring social behavior and enforcing the observance of Islamic moral law, including proper dress and gender segregation. Also known as the *mutaween* (the pious), the *hay'a* (the commission), or simply as the religious police, the CPVPV acts as the “executive arm of the *ulama*,”¹ or the collection of Saudi religious scholars with close ties to the government. Ostensibly, the religious police exercise this power as an informal complement to standard law enforcement. In reality, however, they often act as their own self-regulating force. The morality codes that they uphold lack clearly defined standards.² Their enforcers, missing substantive oversight, have frequently violated the human rights of Saudi citizens, as well as immigrants and expats living in the kingdom. Rather than administering civil law, the religious police arbitrarily impose social order.

This report reviews this imposition in its entirety. The first three sections detail the CPVPV’s history, structure, and the incomplete manner in which Saudi officials have attempted to curtail some of its abuses. The next three sections catalogue the human rights violations enabled by this structure and lack of effective oversight. The final section proposes a series of reforms which will help bring CPVPV operations in line with basic human rights norms.

I. History

In the state-building project following Saudi conquest in the 1920s, an institutionalized morality police, organized in various committees across the kingdom, solidified the relationship between the Wahhabi religious elite and the al-Saud ruling family. Empowered by the al-Saud, the CPVPV and its forerunners became a tool of political maneuver, their strength waxing and waning with the political security of the Saudi ruling family. During times of upheaval or spikes in religious conservatism, Saudi rulers drew their forces close; in the face of popular backlash, Saudi officials attempted their reform.

- **At the nation’s founding:** The first king of the modern Saudi state, Abdulaziz al-Saud, established a committee for the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice in Mecca in 1926,³ in part to satisfy the arch-conservative elements that helped him gain control over much of the Arabian peninsula.⁴ The committee’s mandate included ensuring participation in daily prayer and maintaining gender segregation. It also prohibited music, the consumption of alcohol, and smoking. Although its early development was not extensively recorded, “by the late 1930s, the Committee’s branches were a ubiquitous feature” within the kingdom’s provinces.⁵
- **Mid-century turbulence:** Ibn Saud’s immediate successor, King Saud bin Abdulaziz, reacted to the nationalist and leftist currents sweeping through the country in the 1950s by further expanding the power of the religious committees.⁶ His successor, King Faisal, reduced their influence and activities during the 1960s⁷ in response to the dissatisfaction of an emerging middle class⁸ and in an effort to preclude interference with his modernizing reforms.

- **Reconsolidation:** King Khalid and his immediate successor Fahd greatly expanded the authority of the morality police in the 1970s and '80s. As both Crown Prince and King, Fahd oversaw the entrenchment of the *ulama's* influence in state affairs, partly to counter growing religious fundamentalism, and partly to secure his and his immediate family's image as "guardians of the kingdom's Wahhabi character."⁹ Khalid consolidated the various committees for religious promotion under the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice; a 1400 AH (1980 CE) law guaranteed the President General of the CPVPV a position within the Council of Ministers (or Shoura Council).¹⁰ In the 1980s, Fahd worked with then-CPVPV leader Sheikh Abdulaziz Al al-Sheikh to expand CPVPV activities in the provinces, modernize their patrol force, and better integrate their work with that of the Ministry of Interior (MOI).¹¹
- **Moderate reform:** The late King Abdullah took an ambivalent approach to the CPVPV. Abdullah is remembered¹² in part for curbing the power of the CPVPV to better advance small-scale reforms. During his reign, CPVPV members were required to wear identification, and the participation of non-employee volunteers was formally prohibited. In 2013, new reforms were introduced which limited CPVPV investigations to the "harassment of women, alcohol and drug-related offenses, witchcraft, and sorcery."¹³ Yet under his direction, the Saudi government repeatedly increased the agency's budget by tens¹⁴ of millions¹⁵ of dollars. Fears have already surfaced that his successor, King Salman, may give the religious police a freer hand.¹⁶

II. Current structure and operations

Officially overseen by the Ministry of the Interior (MOI), the CPVPV is supposed to coordinate with standard law enforcement to conduct raids and make arrests. In practice, however, CPVPV units commonly abandon their "legal guidelines."¹⁷ Religious policemen routinely flout the "Law of Criminal Procedure when arresting, detaining, and interrogating suspects," and have done so without the cooperation of standard police officers.¹⁸ A 2013 update to the 1980 law governing CPVPV practice further confuses the limits of its authority, designating the *hay'a* as an independent body¹⁹ which largely controls its own hiring practices²⁰ and determines its police activity "in agreement with" the Minister of the Interior.²¹ The absence of "a sound legal basis" for the CPVPV's power, coupled with the state's approval of its amorphous authority, has permitted the institution to consistently practice arbitrary enforcement methods.

A lack of readily available information detailing CPVPV operations both contributes to its informal character and adds layers of ambiguity for outside observers. The precise scope of the office's activities is difficult to determine, although Human Rights Watch did report that the CPVPV carried out 400,000 arrests in 2005 alone.²² According to its records, in 2011 the CPVPV employed 4,389 staff members who were supported by 1,600 administrative personnel.²³ The Saudi government mandates that a committee exist in every province.²⁴

The recruitment of these members remains a controversial topic within the kingdom. An investigation by Prince Turki bin Faisal al-Saud in the early 2000s revealed that numerous CPVPV operatives were ex-convicts who had memorized portions of the Quran to earn reduced prison terms.²⁵ Recently, however, the Saudi government undertook efforts to better formalize the recruitment process, at least on paper.

Article 5 of the 2013 regulation states that CPVPV recruits should lack a criminal history and “be known for their good reputation and pure biography.”²⁶ Postings on Saudi employment sites encourage²⁷ young men to submit applications on the CPVPV’s website, and one describes a three-step process—an application, an interview, and then a test—required for acceptance into the Riyadh office.²⁸

The manner in which recently-appointed CPVPV president Abdulrahman al-Sanad will lead the organization is still unclear. His immediate predecessor, Abdullatif Al al-Sheikh, was seen as an aggressive reformer who banned volunteer participation in *hay’a* activity, decreed that patrolmen could no longer confiscate phones and other personal items,²⁹ and tried to enforce the prohibition on members carrying out arrests.³⁰ Al-Sanad, who replaced al-Sheikh upon King Salman’s assumption of the monarchy, was previously president of the Islamic University of Medina and has spoken out against Saudis joining militant groups abroad in an effort to deter young men from fighting for the Islamic State.³¹ According to King Salman’s son Faisal, the new chief is expected to ensure that “kindness and gentle behavior”³² animate the activity of the *mutaween*.

This will prove a difficult task, as freshly appointed CPVPV presidents confront a bureaucratic apparatus with a life of its own and employees resistant to reform. Within days of taking on the job, Mr. al-Sanad was forced to call for an investigation³³ into *hay’a* members filmed publicly celebrating the news of al-Sheikh’s departure from the presidency.

III. Cycles of top-down reform

The *hay’a*, due to its amorphous jurisdiction, its sprawling bureaucratic apparatus, and the regular excesses of its employees, is in consistent need of genuine reform. Far from being detrimental to the organization’s functioning, however, the CPVPV’s deficiencies enhance its utility as a mechanism of governmental control.

Saudi officials seeking to reform the agency must both respond to popular dissatisfaction with the CPVPV and maintain the support of its backers within the conservative religious establishment. The need to walk this tightrope often precludes the institutionalization of lasting, structural reforms. Rather, the agency undergoes cyclical periods of limited reforms: either a publicized human rights violation or the appointment of a new, tougher CPVPV head brings about announcements of change. Amendments are decreed, but the recurrence of the same abuse grabs headlines months or several years later, leading to further promises for the enactment of the same set of reforms.

While any number of abuses could illustrate this process, the cycle of superficial reform is exemplified by the state’s recurring attempts to prevent civilian deaths by prohibiting CPVPV patrolmen from chasing suspects in cars. In March 2008, six people died in two separate car chases with members of the CPVPV. In each case, *mutaween* pursued the vehicles on suspicion of gender mixing.³⁴ In both cases, the religious policemen were jailed, investigated, and released. The incidents led then-CPVPV President General Ibrahim al-Ghaith to prohibit agency members from pursuing fleeing suspects. By 2011, however, enforcement of these restrictions had lapsed, and a car chase led to the death of a Jordanian man after CPVPV members caught up with him, forcibly cut his hair, and then beat him to the point of

hospitalization.³⁵ Although the ban on car chases remained intact, officials did not take disciplinary action.

Two years later, in September 2013,³⁶ video³⁷ captured CPVPV members ramming a car off a bridge following pursuit. The driver and passenger of the fleeing vehicle, two brothers, were killed. This time, though there had still been no discernible change in the official car chase policy, then-chief Sheikh Abdullatif Al al-Sheikh issued an executive bylaw which ordered, yet again, that religious policemen refrain from pursuing vehicles. The U.S. Department of State reports, however, that the CPVPV “was not universally adhering to the regulations” at the end of 2013.³⁸ In this manner, the state pursues inadequate “reform” of life-threatening, systematic human rights abuse.

IV. Social Control

By cultivating the CPVPV’s semi-independence and expansive bureaucratic structure, the government can publicly discipline persons living and working within the kingdom by proxy. Saudi residents, especially in more conservative provinces where the government affords the *hay’a* greater latitude, must constantly mind their behavior and appearance when outside the home. Due to the impunity with which CPVPV patrolmen can act in any given instance, this social control manifests itself in a number of ways:

- **Disrupting public events.** The CPVPV makes its presence felt at large events and commemorations, even ones sponsored and promoted by other local and national government agencies. A prime example of this enforcement of control is the repeated interference of the *mutaween* in the **Riyadh Book Fair**. *Hay’a* members strongly object to the gender-mixing which inevitably occurs during the annual event, and to the secular content of many items on sale. In 2011, an American observer described “[f]ive hundred muttawas [who] started a row,” harassed women they deemed insufficiently covered, and disrupted sales.³⁹ The religious police also freely confiscate books after the fair is underway. In 2014, CPVPV members removed 10,000 copies of banned books from the fair, including works from popular Arab poets Mahmoud Darwish and Abdul Wahab al-Bayati, for containing “blasphemous” themes.⁴⁰
- **Enforcing gender segregation.** The religious police go to tremendous lengths to execute their longstanding mandate of enforcing gender segregation. Their efforts, however, do not only target women. In 2008, the CPVPV in Riyadh prosecuted men who were using their pets to attract women, announcing a ban on the sale of cats and dogs.⁴¹
- **Monitoring online speech.** The CPVPV is one of several state agencies with a mandate to monitor online activity. Over the course of 2014, the *hay’a* shut down over 10,000 Twitter accounts⁴² whose owners allegedly violated religious norms and statutes. A number of these social media users were then arrested.
- **Penalizing minority groups.** The CPVPV treatment of the Shia minority in Saudi Arabia, who form roughly 10 percent of the population, is discriminatory. Harassment of Shia worshippers and the closure of Shia holy sites periodically contribute to heightened sectarian tensions within the country.⁴³ The *hay’a* discriminates against foreign Shia that visit Mecca and Medina for the

hajj; patrolmen have been known to disrupt prayer meetings and restrict access to sites that are holy to Shia Muslims.⁴⁴ The CPVPV also aggressively prosecutes what it terms “sorcery” and “witchcraft.”⁴⁵ Practitioners pursued by the CPVPV are frequently (though not exclusively) “foreign domestic workers who bring unfamiliar traditional religious or folk customs from Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Africa, or elsewhere” to Saudi Arabia.⁴⁶ Punishments for these transgressions are severe, ranging from lengthy prison sentences and lashings⁴⁷ to death.⁴⁸

Frequently, CPVPV operations invite criticism and even interference from other government agencies and officials. In March 2011, then-Minister of Information and Culture Dr. Abdulaziz Khoja posted an announcement on his Facebook page which demanded that religious police curtail their patrols at the Riyadh Book Fair and submit complaints of impropriety through the proper channels.⁴⁹ In March 2015, Prince Khalid al-Faisal, the governor of the Mecca province, prohibited religious police from interfering with a Jeddah comedy festival in which gender mixing was likely to occur.⁵⁰ While certain government officials can limit the actions of CPVPV members in individual instances, this occasional pushback only highlights the absence of the greater, systemic checks needed in order to bring the *hay’a* in line with human rights norms.

V. Discrimination against Women

Women in Saudi Arabia frequently suffer harassment at the hands of the morality police. As representatives of the conservative religious establishment, the *hay’a* are often first to enforce Saudi laws which discriminate against women. On a daily basis, CPVPV members in all provinces instigate tense encounters with women; among other duties, they are charged with enforcing sex segregation in public and in the workplace while also pressuring women to wear *niqab* (which includes veiling the face and eyes) when outside the home.⁵¹

CPVPV members consistently seek to exert their direct control over female bodies by way of penalizing minor transgressions in dress and behavior. In May 2012, a group of *mutaween* attempted to expel a woman from a shopping mall, citing her nail polish as grounds for removal.⁵² The woman filmed the encounter, which later went viral on Youtube. Her video served only as a brief glimpse into the daily negotiations Saudi women must broker with state representatives attempting to interfere in their affairs.

The CPVPV also works to enforce the Guardianship System, Saudi regulations which force adult women to be the legal dependents of related men, typically fathers or husbands. In March 2015, the leader of the CPVPV’s branch in Mecca, Abdullah al-Asmri, publicly voiced his concern over the number of female students who were leaving the grounds of Um al-Qura University without the knowledge or permission of their parents, mixing with young men, and traveling to entertainment venues. He insisted that the university institute a system for female students to obtain parental permission before leaving school grounds.⁵³ Administrators declined the request. Other attempts to sanction women within the confines of the system are undertaken out of public view. In urban areas, religious police do not typically detain or arrest women for improper dress alone because they rely on male relatives to discipline the transgressors privately once their fault has been pointed out.⁵⁴

The authority which CPVPV members exercise over women has enabled men among their ranks to harass and otherwise exploit them sexually. In 2014, Saudi authorities arrested the head of a local committee for vice prevention within the Jazan province for blackmailing a young woman. After the woman had been caught in the middle of a socially-stigmatize infraction, the committee head promised to keep her case under wraps in return for sex.⁵⁵ While this type of official corruption is not often reported within Saudi Arabia, it tracks with the stories of Saudi women who describe unwanted and untoward attention from *hay'a* patrolmen.

VI. Five Cases to Know

The CPVPV has committed a startling number of human rights abuses that do not comfortably fit within the aforementioned categories, arbitrary detention, torture and unlawful deprivation of life prominent among them, within the last fifteen years alone. While ADHRB cannot cover these violations in their entirety, we here outline five cases representative of the *hay'a's* life-endangering practices:

1. Mecca girl's school fire

On 11 March 2002, religious police were some of the first to arrive on the scene when Girls' Intermediate School No. 31 in Mecca caught fire.⁵⁶ Multiple reports indicate that CPVPV members intentionally obstructed girls who were not properly covered from leaving the building. Eyewitnesses told the BBC⁵⁷ and Human Rights Watch⁵⁸ that the officers attempted to keep firemen from approaching the school and even beat girls without appropriate dress to prevent them from escaping. 15 school girls perished before other civil authorities subdued the religious police and entered the school.

2. King Khalid University protest

Politically-mobilized women are particular targets of CPVPV aggression. On 8 March 2012, hundreds of women at King Khalid University in Abha demonstrated⁵⁹ against discrimination, including a lack of female-appropriate facilities. Religious police, alongside standard law enforcement units, violently attacked the gathering of women students, killing⁶⁰ Hajer al-Yazidi and injuring at least 50 others.

3. Sexually harassing foreign women

In February 2008, CPVPV members arrested an American woman in Riyadh for meeting in public with a male colleague. The religious police transported her to prison, subjected her to a strip search and forced her to undress in front of them. They then used her clothes to wipe the floor of a dirty room and forced her to put them on again. She was taken before a judge who informed her that "filthy clothes were appropriate for the filthy person she was."⁶¹

4. Unlawful detention

Though religious police are ordered to only arrest persons under the direction of a police officer, they frequently violate this injunction. In December 2006, religious police abducted two women after assaulting their male chauffeur and commandeering their car. They later abandoned the vehicle and left the women locked in the trunk.⁶² In July 2007, CPVPV officers arrested Ahmad al-Bulawi "on suspicion of being in 'illegal seclusion' with an unrelated woman."⁶³ He died in custody after being beaten.

5. Home invasion

Outside the public sphere, the CPVPV regularly encroaches upon private life. On 22 February 2015, CPVPV members invaded⁶⁴ a home in the city of Buraydah to halt a birthday party. The policemen were concerned that the all-male gathering, some participants of which had “untraditional hairstyles and dress”, may be “leading to immorality or even homosexuality.” The men were detained despite the presence of a cake and candles, and the absence of women and alcohol.

VII. Proposed Reforms

Despite the abuses listed above, recent years have seen a tougher government line toward CPVPV excesses. Popular approval⁶⁵ of the religious police within Saudi Arabia has reached a low point. In February 2015, two *mutaween* were fired⁶⁶ for corruption. The time for reform is now, while all parties, from the citizenry to the upper halls of government, recognize the need for change.

To this end, the Saudi government can remodel the CPVPV in a manner which respects its religious obligations while preventing its members from participating in any further corruption or human rights violations:

1. **The Saudi government must dramatically reduce the number of patrolmen and other personnel employed by the CPVPV.** The figure of nearly 6,000 employees listed by the CPVPV in 2011 should be reduced to 3,000 or less. Fewer employees and less bureaucratic sprawl will enhance the probability that reforms are fully enacted, not just decreed.
2. **The Regulation of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice must be updated to prevent the CPVPV from further hiring of any “police forces,”** whether or not this is done in consultation with the Minister of Interior.
3. **The president general of the CPVPV should be removed from the Shoura Council, and the CPVPV should be placed under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowments, Da’wah, and Guidance (MOIA).**⁶⁷ This reform will maintain the CPVPV’s Muslim character while ending its status as a semiautonomous agency. Instead of answering directly to the king, and thus operating as a tool of political maneuver, the CPVPV will answer to the Minister of the MOIA, which will concretely outline its jurisdiction.
4. **The CPVPV must institute an extensive background check for potential employees** to ensure that recruits do not possess a criminal record and that they do not have a history of violent behavior. This process must go beyond receiving assurances of their good reputation.
5. **The CPVPV must adopt and publicize a detailed, internal code of conduct for employees.** Violation of this code, or outside allegations of wrongdoing, would result in swift and impartial investigations under the direction of the MOIA that would yield appropriate disciplinary measures.
6. **All CPVPV employees should undergo periodic training on human rights awareness and how to apply human rights standards in their interactions with the local population.**
7. **All CPVPV employees should undergo periodic training aimed at preventing the recurrence of sexual harassment and assault.**

8. **No longer a police force for aggressive social monitoring, the CPVPV should serve as a conduit to legal authorities for local community members concerned about illicit activities within their communities.** Its field offices can also become home to religious events and educational classes for those with questions regarding proper adherence to the Saudi government's interpretation of Islamic law.

VIII. Notes

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