

Five Saudi women arrested for driving

Five Saudi women have been arrested in the first government response to an organised campaign by women to drive in defiance of long-standing rules in the country.



A female Saudi motorist speaks to the media after driving her vehicle in defiance of the ban on driving in Riyadh last week. Photo: REUTERS



By Richard Spencer, Middle East Correspondent

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Campaigners said that four women were arrested by religious police in a single car being driven by one of them in the Red Sea city of Jeddah on Tuesday morning.

Later in the day, four regular police cars also in Jeddah surrounded a vehicle being driven by another woman, in which a man, either her husband or brother, was riding as a passenger. Both were arrested and taken into custody.

On Wednesday night, the authorities had released no news about the arrests or said what would happen to the women. Manal al-Sharif, the computer security expert whose arrest for driving triggered the campaign last month, spent several days in custody before being released after signing a pledge not to repeat the offence.

The dispute about women driving has become symbolic for the demands of many women, particularly in the professional classes, for less restrictive rules on their public lives.

Two Fridays ago, a group of women launched a Facebook campaign for a lifting of the ban on women driving by taking to the wheel. Those who took part all have international licences.

There were no arrests and just one ticket issued for driving without a Saudi licence. Eman al-Nafjan, a well-known blogger and one of the organisers, said there were reports of police being tipped off to women drivers by telephone calls but being broadly sympathetic.

She said it was significant that the case of the woman being arrested with a man was reported in a conservative newspaper, Sabq, which had supported the ban. Previously, the campaign had received little coverage in the domestic media.

"The motivation for this is to scare women away from driving," she said.

It remains to be seen whether the full details of these arrests will ever be made clear. The arrest of a woman in this way is seen as shameful by many families, meaning the authorities rarely give details of such cases and the women themselves are encouraged not to come forward to the press.