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Saudi King Dismisses 2 Officials in a Shuffle

By [ROBERT F. WORTH](#)

BEIRUT, Lebanon — The king of [Saudi Arabia](#) dismissed two powerful religious figures Saturday, as part of a government shuffle that appeared aimed at reforming the kingdom's hard-line religious establishment.

[King Abdullah](#) removed the chief of the feared religious police and a conservative cleric who declared last fall that it was permissible to kill the owners of television stations that broadcast immoral content, the Saudi Press Agency reported. Also, for the first time in the kingdom, he appointed a woman to serve as a deputy cabinet minister, choosing a respected technocrat who will preside over girls' education.

The changes are seen as an effort to moderate the power of hard-line clerics in Saudi Arabia's religious establishment, which wields tremendous power but has come under strong criticism in recent years. The intolerance of the cane-wielding religious police, known as the mutawa, has become a special source of popular anger.

King Abdullah has spoken often of the need for reform, but the changes announced Saturday are the first serious shake-up since he came to power in August 2005. The moves were not unexpected, but the timing was a surprise: the announcement had not been expected until late summer.

The changes announced by the official news agency included a reconfiguration of the Grand Ulema Commission, an influential body of religious scholars from all branches of Sunni Islam. In the past, the commission had been dominated by clerics from the austere Hanbali school, but now moderates will be represented. There were also changes to the Saudi military establishment.

"These are important changes, and they are pushing King Abdullah's reform agenda in many different areas — religious, legal and military," said Bernard Haykel, a professor of Middle East studies at [Princeton University](#). The king replaced the head of the religious police, Sheik Ibrahim al-Ghaith, with a more moderate figure, Abdel Aziz bin Humain, the news agency reported.

Sheik Saleh al-Luhaidan, the cleric who issued the fatwa about killing television executives, was also replaced by a more moderate figure, Saleh bin Humaid, who was head of the Saudi Consultative Council, an appointed parliamentary body.

Sheik Luhaidan, who had held his post since the mid-1980s, had been a major stumbling block for the judicial reforms King Abdullah had hoped to enact.

Noura al-Fayez, the new minister for girls' education, was appointed along with a new education minister, Prince Faisal bin Abdullah, the king's son-in-law, the news agency said. Saudi schools are often cited as incubators for extremist sentiment.

Muhammad al-Milfy contributed reporting from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

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