

Saudi royal opposes parliament elections

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A senior Saudi royal ruled out direct elections to Saudi Arabia's unelected parliament in comments published on Monday, days after King Abdullah appeared to hold open the possibility.

Saudi Arabia, an absolute monarchy closely allied to the United States, held elections for half the members of its municipal councils in 2005, and reformers now hope for elections to the Shura assembly in line with moves in other Gulf nations.

'When I go to the Shura assembly I meet members who are of the finest calibre in the country and that's what's important -- the people and quality. It's not important how they got there, it's important how they are,' Interior Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz said in comments in Al Watan newspaper.

He was speaking after an address to a closed session of the parliamentary body, whose all-male delegates are appointed by the king to advise the government on legislation.

Last week King Abdullah did not rule out reforming the assembly in an interview with official news agency SPA.

'We think the Shura Council does represent Saudi society and we are happy with its performance,' he said when asked about the idea of instituting elections to the body.

But he added: 'We are indeed looking forward to more effectiveness and we will not hesitate to support any step that enables it to develop its performance to the ideal level.'

King Abdullah ascended the throne in 2005 promising a programme of cautious reforms in the world's biggest oil exporter, which rules by a strict reading of Islamic law.

Analysts and diplomats say he faces stiff opposition from senior members of the royal family as well as a powerful religious establishment fearing loss of influence.