

Saudi Arabia bans maids from Indonesia and the Philippines

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On July 2, the Saudi Arabian government declared a hiring ban on domestic employees from Indonesia and the Philippines.

One million Indonesians work in Saudi Arabia, almost all of whom are maids, while 1.3 million Filipinos are employed in the country, approximately 200,000 as maids. Filipino workers sent home \$US1.7 billion in remittances from Saudi Arabia last year. About 44 percent of all Indonesian remittances come from workers employed in Saudi Arabia, totaling \$759 million in 2010.

The Indonesian and Philippine governments are heavily dependent on these remittances. Indonesian President Yudhoyono and Philippine President Aquino are currently haggling with the Saudi Arabian government to resume hiring their exported labour. Both presidents blamed the Saudi Arabian policy of Nitaqat, or the ‘saudization’ of jobs, for the ban.

In 2009, 80 percent of the workforce in Saudi Arabia was foreign migrant workers. Excluding government jobs, migrant workers amounted to 90 percent of the workforce. Workers in the oil fields, in the construction industry, in retail, personal drivers, cooks, nannies, maids—these employees come from the Philippines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Ethiopia.

The official unemployment rate for Saudi Arabian nationals was 10.8 percent in 2010, but this figure only documented males currently seeking employment. *Arab News* reported that unemployment among Saudi women was as high as 30 percent. Unemployment among youth aged 20-24 was estimated to be at 39 percent.

In response, the Saudi Arabian government announced its Nitaqat policy in June, making scapegoats of foreign

workers for its own policies and rising joblessness. A quota system has been put in place for the ‘saudization’ of jobs. Private sector employers will be placed on a color-coded scheme according to the percentage of their workers who are Saudi nationals. Companies with an insufficient percentage will be coded red or orange and penalized.

The Nitaqat policy, however, excludes maids. Maids are hired by individuals, not corporations. In 2010, Saudi Arabian legal adviser Saleh bin Saad Al-Laheedan issued a fatwa, or religious edict, allowing Saudi women to work as maids, provided that they have no other recourse, are over 50 and are accompanied by a mehram, or close male relative. However, by the end of the year, only 30 Saudi nationals were reported to be working as maids.

As a result, ‘saudization’ does not apply to maids. The ban on maids finds its explanation in the populist posturing and diplomatic bartering that the Indonesian, Philippine and Saudi Arabian governments have conducted, using the working class as so many bargaining chips.

The rift with Indonesia was sparked after the Saudi Arabian government had an Indonesian maid, Ruyati Binti Sapubi, beheaded with a sword on June 18. She was found guilty of stabbing her employer to death with a knife in January. She said that she was constantly abused by her employer and that she was held prisoner in the home, despite her repeated requests that she be allowed to return to Indonesia.

President Yudhoyono’s party, which has been rocked by corruption scandals, took up the issue as a means of trying to reverse its unpopularity. In the face of a public outcry, Yudhoyono recalled the Indonesian ambassador

from Saudi Arabia and announced that beginning August 1, Indonesia would temporarily stop sending maids to Saudi Arabia.

The political cynicism involved is highlighted by the failure of the Yudhoyono administration to act on previous instances of abuse. The *Economist* reported that “in November 2010, a 23-year-old maid named Sumiati Binti Salan Mustapa was admitted to the intensive-care unit of a hospital in Medina with severe bruises, cuts inflicted by scissors, and burns across her body from an iron. That same month, the body of another Indonesian maid, Kikim Komalasari, was found in a dumpster in the Saudi town of Abha. This past March, yet another Indonesian maid, Aan Darwati Binti Udin, was found dead in the home of her Saudi employer, leaving many to suspect that she was murdered.” In each event the Indonesian government was silent.

Philippine President Aquino, on the other hand, is not protesting abuses but demanding that Filipino workers be guaranteed a minimum wage of \$US400 a month. The Saudi Arabian government is only willing to guarantee \$200 a month.

Aquino’s bargaining with the Saudi government has nothing to do with concern for the working class. Filipino maids working in Manila are paid on average less than \$100 per month. Those hired through a maid service may receive \$100. The majority, who are hired through an acquaintance in the province, are paid perhaps half that amount. Most receive no day off, no benefits, no medical care. No Philippine president has said or done anything about the abusive conditions in which Filipino maids are forced to work at home.

Aquino is seeking a pay rise for those working in Saudi Arabia solely to increase the revenue stream of the Philippine government, which relies on the transfusion of workers’ remittances to keep the pallid Philippine economy circulating. He has no intention of pushing for higher wages for maids working in the Philippines.

Faced with protests from Aquino and Yudhoyono, the Saudi Arabian government announced that it would stop hiring their exported maids, and said it would hire instead from Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka. Riyadh is obviously seeking to play governments off against each other to provide the cheapest labour and to silence any

criticism of the endemic abuse and discrimination suffered by foreign workers, particularly domestic servants, in Saudi Arabia.

Hundreds of Filipino workers, whom the Aquino administration purports to be representing, were repatriated to the Philippines after years of being stranded in Saudi Arabia when their employers confiscated their travel documents. They had been living under a bridge in Jeddah, and were then transferred to a deportation facility. Having finally arrived in the Philippines, they have been confined for over a month in a government shelter in Manila. They cannot afford to return to their home provinces and the government refuses to pay their fare.

Five women in the shelter have been diagnosed over the past month as suffering from acute psychiatric disorders and mental breakdowns. One woman’s eight-month child has suffered from prolonged diarrhea and vomiting and has been denied medical care both by the shelter and by local hospitals, because she cannot afford to see a doctor.

The abuse of foreign workers is a universal process. An Indonesian maid starved to death in her employer’s home in Malaysia a month ago. There had been a temporary ban on exporting maids from Indonesia to Malaysia but that was quickly lifted when her dead body inconvenienced Jakarta’s desire to restore the traffic in servants between the two countries.

The plight of these workers is an international one. They share a common fate with their class brothers and sisters around the globe. They are exploited as cheap labour in the countries where they are working, with no democratic rights and frequently subject to physical and psychological abuse. Their own governments are the facilitators of this modern-day slave trade. Workers’ only recourse is the international struggle for socialism.



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