

Saudi crackdown on migrants

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Saudi Arabia's crackdown on so-called illegal immigrants caused millions of the country's foreign workers to stay away from work last week, reportedly bringing services in all the major cities to a halt.

The authorities raided offices, shops, and residences where foreign workers were thought to be hiding, set up roadblocks and detained those who could not show they had a work visa. The crackdown was suspended on Saturday.

According to Saudi newspapers, the raids caused the closure of hundreds of schools as foreign teachers failed to show up for work. There were claims that officials destroyed the documents of some they stopped, with African workers being particularly targeted. Some businesses posted guards to look out for labour inspectors, while others kept the lights off.

The purpose of the raids was to enforce the policy of "Saudiization" for jobs, whereby a definite quota of jobs in all businesses, small as well as large, is reserved for Saudi nationals. This is to reduce the reliance on migrant labour, believed to total 8 million workers, with up to 2 million to 3 million illegal workers. Companies that fail to employ the required number of Saudis are to be subject to a \$640 fine per foreign worker, set to cost Saudi businesses more than \$4 billion this year.

The foreign workforce includes skilled workers and unskilled workers, usually from South and South East Asia. Migrant workers labour for a pittance in dreadful conditions without rights, and are brutally exploited.

Behind this "Saudiization" of jobs lies the increasing instability of the largest of the Arab Gulf states, one of Washington's key allies in the oil- and gas-rich region and on whom it depends in its ongoing efforts to establish its unchallenged global hegemony.

Riyadh, along with the other Gulf monarchies, provides the crucial Sunni axis against Shi'ite Iran and its allies: Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Iraq's

powerful Shi'ite parties, which the US views as a regional threat. At the same time, the kingdom has functioned as the linchpin of social reaction during the mass protests that have shaken the Middle East. It has acted to crush all protests before they could spread to Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states.

While the economy has expanded at 3.5 percent a year over the last five years, this has benefited only the narrow layers around the ruling House of Saud. The global recession means that this growth rate is set to halve in 2013.

Saudi Arabia has one of the world's highest levels of youth unemployment. The official unemployment rate of young males was 24 percent in 2008, while nearly half of the country's young women were without work. Saudi women are unable to work in many sectors of the economy because they are forbidden to work with men.

According to Saudi Labour Minister Adel Faqih, there are 2 million job seekers and 85 percent of them are female, including 373,000 university graduates. Faqih said that there were 8 million foreign workers, 6 million of them in low-paying jobs. Nearly 70 percent of foreign workers were paid less than 1,000 riyals (\$270), and 18 percent less than 2,000 riyals (\$540).

The oil-rich country needs 400,000 new jobs every year just to keep up with the number of young people, of whom 100,000 are graduates, entering the labour market,

Following the mass social movements in Tunisia and Egypt, and just days after protests broke out in neighbouring Bahrain in March 2011, protests began in the Eastern Province, where 90 percent of Saudi's proven oil reserves are located and most of the Shi'ite population live. Saudi Shi'ites, who constitute 10 to 15 percent of the population, face discrimination, arbitrary arrest and detention, closure of their mosques and poverty.

Their rallies were brutally suppressed. Nevertheless,

protests have continued sporadically.

At the same time, King Abdullah sought to buy off dissent with an unprecedented package of cash handouts and social programmes totalling \$130 billion, more than every annual government budget before 2007, including the decision to employ 60,000 additional Saudis in the Ministry of Interior alone. However, such largesse, which depends upon high oil prices—not guaranteed under conditions of world recession—has failed to stem the demands for economic change and basic democratic and political rights.

The Internet has become the main platform of political expression in a country where the House of Saud operates a system of brutal repression, including public executions, torture and detention without trial, and outlaws all political parties, public protests, strikes and expressions of dissent.

As dissent in the form of an unprecedented barrage of criticism and ridicule on social media sites has mounted, the ruling clique has sought to clamp down on social media sites and bloggers. The liberal writer Turki al-Hamed has been imprisoned for his Tweets, and youth have been thrown into prison without charges over their Facebook posts.

Last month, two leading Saudi human rights activists, 62-year-old Abdullah al-Hamed and economics professor Mohammed Fahad al-Qahtani, were sentenced to long prison terms for various offences, including sedition, spreading false information to foreign media, and “Internet crimes”, because they had used Twitter and other sites to attack the government. The judge ruled that the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association, known as Acpra, of which the two activists were founding members, was to be disbanded and its funds confiscated.

The government has reportedly asked telecom companies to look at ways they could monitor or block the use of free Internet phone services such as Skype, with the Ministry of the Interior describing social networking, particularly Twitter, as a tool used by fighters, including supporters of Al Qaeda, to stir social unrest.

The authorities are also using the divide and rule policy of sectarianism to quell dissent, deliberately whipping up tensions between the majority Sunni and minority Shi’ites, whom they maintain are being manipulated by Iran, just as they routinely blamed

Iranian “interference” in Bahrain and the Yemen for the unrest there, without producing any evidence.

Last month, 16 Saudi Shi’ites and two foreign nationals were arrested on charges of spying for Iran in what was widely seen as playing the sectarian card. Its purpose is to enable the government to castigate the Shi’ites as some kind of treacherous fifth column, and thus stop their demands for economic, social and political reform from coalescing with the wider social discontent.

Pinning the blame for social discontent on Iran plays well in Washington and London, which are keen to use any excuse to demonise Tehran as part of their broader strategy of isolating Iran, while at the same time serving to blunt criticism of their brutal suppression of all opposition.



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