



THE CENTRE FOR ACADEMIC SHI'A STUDIES

Saudi Arabia: Anti-Shi'a Discrimination in Employment and the Work Place

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July 2014

In Saudi Arabia, Shi'a Muslims face regular discrimination in the work place. They are denied access to certain careers, limited in their options for promotion and prevented from practicing their religion. This discrimination is facilitated through tacit exclusion and a lack of access to effective channels of worker representation and protection.

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Introduction

Shia Muslims of Saudi Arabia are regularly marginalised and discriminated against in everyday life; in education, religious practice and political life. However, little has been written about the discrimination that Saudi Shia Muslims face in employment and the workplace. Shia Muslims are denied access to certain careers, limited in their options for promotion and prevented from practicing their religion, among other issues. There is a significant lack of Shia Muslims in positions of power, both within the private and public sectors. This institutionalised and normalised discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in Saudi Arabia is facilitated through tacit exclusion and a lack of access to effective channels of worker representation and protection.

As well as Shia Muslims, the ITUC also reports that there is evidence of discrimination in the workplace against women, disabled people, LGBT workers, people of non-Arab origin and people who are HIV-positive.¹ The ILO claims that other religious minorities, such as Christians and Hindus, are discriminated against in Saudi Arabia through, for example, job advertisements excluding applicants from certain religious groups, measures preventing open practice of their religion and the requirement to refrain from public displays of religious symbols.²

Much has previously been written about the mistreatment of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, with reports of extreme “violence, intimidation, confinement and threats against many migrant workers, especially female domestic workers” according to the International Trade Union Conference (ITUC).³ These examples demonstrate the significant failings of the labour and employment policies of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which have created an environment in which minorities feel unrepresented, marginalised and victimised. This report will focus specifically on the discrimination faced by the Shia Muslim community and the actions that Saudi Arabia must take to implement equal employment policies. However, the issue of anti-Shia discrimination can be viewed within the context of wider discrimination against many minority sections of the community, which demonstrate a fundamental lack of respect for equal opportunities within the Saudi establishment.

Shi'as Muslims of Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, Shi'a Muslims form a minority group; they constitute approximately ten to fifteen per cent of the national Muslim population.⁴ Within the Shi'a community, most are Twelver Shi'as with approximately one million Ismailis⁵ and several thousand Zaydis.⁶ Geographically, there is a

¹ International Trade Union Confederation (2012), 'Internationally Recognised Core Labour Standards in Saudi Arabia: Report for the WTO General Council Review of the Trade Policies of Saudi Arabia', Geneva, p. 3-4

² International Labour Organisation (2007), 'Discrimination at Work In the Middle East and North Africa', *ILO Factsheet*, Available at: http://www.ilo.org/declaration/info/factsheets/WCMS_DECL_FS_92_EN/lang-en/index.htm [Accessed on 16th April 2014] p. 2

³ International Trade Union Confederation (2012), 'Internationally Recognised Core Labour Standards in Saudi Arabia: Report for the WTO General Council Review of the Trade Policies of Saudi Arabia', Geneva, p. 6

⁴ Pew Research Centre (2009), 'Mapping the Global Muslim Population', *Religion and Public Life Project*, Available at: <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/> [Accessed on: 17th April 2014]; Central Intelligence Agency (2014), 'Saudi Arabia', *The World Factbook* [Online], Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html> [Accessed on: 17th April 2014]

⁵ Wilcke, C. (2008) 'Discrimination against Muslims in Saudi Arabia', *The Guardian* [Online], Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/sep/22/religion.islam> [Accessed on: 6th May 2014]

large concentration of Shi'as in the Eastern Province, particularly in the oases of al-Ahsa and Qatif.⁷ This region is of particular strategic importance because of the discovery of oil there in the 1930s and the subsequent concentration of the Kingdom's main oil interests in that region.⁸

There is a long history of persecution of Shi'a Muslims in Saudi Arabia. During the unification of what now forms the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Eastern Province was brought into the state by military conquest at the beginning of the 20th Century. In this period, the Shi'as of the region experienced intense violence at the hands of Al-Saud's army.⁹ In order to ease discord in the state, a general amnesty was declared in 1933 by King Fahd with the Shi'a opposition. Pledges to improve the socio-political status of Shi'a citizens were made in return for the cessation of anti-government activism from Shi'a opposition groups.¹⁰ In a similar vein, 2003 saw King Abdullah introduce a 'National Dialogue', in which Saudi Shi'a leaders were invited to take part in an attempt to once again ease tensions.¹¹ However, each of these initiatives failed to produce any tangible changes to the social, political or economic status of the disadvantaged Shi'a minority.

Shi'a dissatisfaction with their treatment within the state was brought to a head in 2011 when, inspired by the Arab Spring and events in Egypt, protests broke out in the Eastern Province. Protestors called for an end to anti-Shi'a discrimination and fairer political representation, as well as declaring their solidarity with protests in Shi'a-majority Bahrain. The response of the Saudi regime has been categorised by many human rights observers - such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch - as heavy-handed and repressive, with accusations of various human rights abuses levelled at the government. To date, it is believed that twenty protestors have been killed¹² and hundreds of people have been held without charge.¹³

One of the biggest factors contributing to the prevalence of anti-Shi'a discrimination in Saudi Arabia is the doctrinal and ideological anti-Shi'ism that is found in Wahhabism, the dominant Islamic school within the state. Wahhabism is an ultraorthodox branch of Sunni Islam that focuses on the purification of Islam and its return to its true, original form.¹⁴ Within Wahhabi doctrine, Shi'a Islam has traditionally been treated as a deviant sect because some Shi'a practices conflict with some of those within Wahhabism. Due to this doctrinal opposition within Wahhabism and Saudi Arabia's unique position within the Muslim world as the keepers of two of Islam's most important sacred

⁶ Majidyar, Ahmad K. (2013), 'Saudi Arabia's forgotten Shi'ite Spring', *American Enterprise Institute* [Online], Available at: <http://www.aei.org/outlook/foreign-and-defense-policy/regional/middle-east-and-north-africa/saudi-arabias-forgotten-shiite-spring/> [Accessed on 17th April 2014]

⁷ Matthiesen, T. (2013), *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring That Wasn't*, (Stanford, California: Stanford Briefs), p. 3

⁸ Matthiesen, T. (2013), *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring That Wasn't*, (Stanford, California: Stanford Briefs), p. 3

⁹ Majidyar, Ahmad K. (2013), 'Saudi Arabia's forgotten Shi'ite Spring', *American Enterprise Institute* [Online], Available at: <http://www.aei.org/outlook/foreign-and-defense-policy/regional/middle-east-and-north-africa/saudi-arabias-forgotten-shiite-spring/> [Accessed on 17th April 2014]

¹⁰ Majidyar, A. K. (2013), 'Saudi Arabia's forgotten Shi'ite Spring', *American Enterprise Institute* [Online], Available at: <http://www.aei.org/outlook/foreign-and-defense-policy/regional/middle-east-and-north-africa/saudi-arabias-forgotten-shiite-spring/> [Accessed on 17th April 2014]

¹¹ Matthiesen, T. (2013), *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring That Wasn't*, (Stanford, California: Stanford Briefs), p. 73

¹² BBC News (2014), 'Reporting Saudi Arabia's Hidden Uprising', *BBC News* [Online], Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-27619309> [Accessed on 5th June 2014]

¹³ Amnesty International (2013), 'Saudi Arabia', *Annual Report 2013: The State of The World's Human Rights*, Available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/saudi-arabia/report-2013> [Accessed on 17th April 2014]

¹⁴ Matthiesen, T. (2013), *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring That Wasn't*, (Stanford, California: Stanford Briefs), p. 21

sites (Mecca and Medina), Saudi Arabia has become “the centre of doctrinal anti-Shiism” within the Islamic world.¹⁵

It is, therefore, within this context of historical, religious and ideological anti-Shi’ism that this report examines the discrimination of Shi’a citizens in Saudi Arabia. It is widely acknowledged by human rights organisations, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, that Shi’as face discrimination in terms of religious practice, political participation and education. However, very little has been written specifically about the discrimination Shi’as face in employment and the work place. This can, in part, be attributed to the difficulty of gathering information relating to discrimination in the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia does not allow employees to take collective action or to form trade unions, which means there are few representative organisations to record and report on instances of Shi’a discrimination. This report will highlight some of the key areas where there is evidence for discrimination against Shi’as in employment and the workplace.

¹⁵ Matthiesen, T. (2013), *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring That Wasn’t*, (Stanford, California: Stanford Briefs), p. 21

Anti-Shi'a discrimination in Education

Anti-Shi'ism within the Saudi education system can be considered as playing a significant role in promoting and perpetuating discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in the Kingdom. This is evident in the lack of Shi'as in prominent positions within the educational system, as well as the negative attitude towards Shi'ism that is often prevalent in the classroom.

Within the education system, Shi'a Islam is routinely characterised as a heretical sect by teaching staff and through textbooks. For example, school textbooks often describe Shi'as as unbelievers who reject the oneness of God.¹⁶ In addition, Shi'a students experience harassment and discrimination in the school environment. For example, Human Rights Watch reports cases where Shi'a students have been called unbelievers by teachers or suspended for having arguments relating to Shi'ism.¹⁷ There is also a significant lack of Shi'as in senior positions within the education system. For example, of the 200 girls' schools in al-Ahsa – an area of significant Shi'a population - there are no Shi'a principals and only 15 Shi'a principals out of the 200 boys' schools.¹⁸ Finally, Shi'a staff are barred from teaching certain subjects in schools, such as history or religion.¹⁹

Furthermore, in the case of higher education, Shi'as are regularly barred from higher education institutions and their loyalty to Saudi Arabia is often questioned if they seek higher education abroad.²⁰ In regards to staffing in higher education, few Shi'as are employed as professors or administration staff. For example, according to the US Department of State, at one university in al-Ahsa, where 50 per cent of the population is Shi'a, only 5 per cent of all professors are Shi'a Muslims.²¹

By introducing anti-Shi'ism into the discourse of education, it normalises and concretises anti-Shi'a sentiment among both staff and students. Considering Shi'ism to be outside of the fold of Islam becomes routine. Furthermore, the exclusion of Shi'as from senior positions within the system or from teaching certain subjects - particularly in places where Shi'as constitutes a significant proportion or majority of the population – demonstrates a significant lack of equality and freedom in education sector employment. This is part of a wider pattern of discrimination against Shi'a Muslim citizens in employment and the workplace in Saudi Arabia.

¹⁶ Matthiesen, T. (2013), *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring That Wasn't*, (Stanford, California: Stanford Briefs), p. 73

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch (2009), 'Denied Dignity: Systematic Discrimination and Hostility Toward Saudi Shia Citizens', *Human Rights Watch*, USA, p. 10-11

¹⁸ United States Department of State (2012), 'Saudi Arabia', *International Religious Freedom Report 2012*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, USA, p. 13

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch (2009), 'Denied Dignity: Systematic Discrimination and Hostility Toward Saudi Shia Citizens', *Human Rights Watch*, USA, p. 10

²⁰ Majidyar, A. K. (2013), 'Saudi Arabia's forgotten Shi'ite Spring', *American Enterprise Institute* [Online], Available at: <http://www.aei.org/outlook/foreign-and-defense-policy/regional/middle-east-and-north-africa/saudi-arabias-forgotten-shiite-spring/> [Accessed on 17th April 2014]

²¹ United States Department of State (2012), 'Saudi Arabia', *International Religious Freedom Report 2012*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, USA, p. 13

Discrimination against Shi'as in the work place

The Public Sector

Toby Matthiesen argues that Saudi Shi'a citizens "have long complained of discrimination in religious practice, government employment and business".²² One of the key areas where discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in employment and the workplace is evident is the lack of Shi'as in prominent positions and positions of power. According to a report for the US Library of Congress, this was evident from the very beginning of the modern Saudi state. The report claims that "Shia came to occupy the lowest rung of the socioeconomic ladder in the newly formed Saudi state" as they were often excluded from employment in the civil service, the military and the police.²³ As oil was discovered in the Eastern Province, Shi'a citizens found employment making up most of the skilled and unskilled work force in Saudi Aramco but had little share in the new wealth.²⁴ A former Saudi opposition figure, now living in the UK, has claimed that Shi'as are not allowed to take positions in agriculture, banks or hospitals in the area of Khateeb and that Shi'as are not allowed to work in medium or high-ranking positions in the public sector.²⁵

A common grievance voiced by Shi'a citizens in Saudi Arabia is that there is a distinct lack of Shi'a Muslims in positions of political power. There are no Shi'a cabinet ministers or high-ranking government officials. As Human Rights Watch identify, it is unclear if this is because of overt government barriers or a lack of Shi'a candidates due to low expectations of success.²⁶ Furthermore, of the 150 members appointed to the Shura Council, the legislature that advises the King, only 6 are Shi'a.²⁷ A former opposition member from Saudi Arabia claims that certain government offices do not take on Shi'a employees;²⁸ for example, Shi'as are rarely employed in the foreign and security services.²⁹ Ismaili Shi'as also face discrimination in government employment. For example, the number of Ismaili heads of local government departments has dropped from 7 out of 35 to just 1 remaining Ismaili.³⁰

Another sector where Shi'a citizens are disproportionately represented and limited in employment is in the armed forces, police and security services. According to Human Rights Watch, Shi'as are under-represented in the armed forces and "Shia students generally cannot gain admission to

²² Matthiesen, T. (2012), 'Saudi Arabia's Shiite Problem', *Foreign Affairs* [Online], Available at:

http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/07/saudi_arabia_s_shiite_problem [Accessed on: 2nd May 2014]

²³ Chapin Metz, H. ed. (1992) 'Shia', *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, Library of Congress, Washington USA, Available at:

<http://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/> [Accessed on: 2nd May 2014]

²⁴ Chapin Metz, H. ed. (1992) 'Shia', *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, Library of Congress, Washington USA, at:

<http://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/> Accessed on: 2nd May 2014

²⁵ Information supplied to CASS by Hamza al-Hassan, a Saudi dissident and former opposition member now living in the UK, via email on 14th April 2014

²⁶ Human Rights Watch (2009), 'Denied Dignity: Systematic Discrimination and Hostility Toward Saudi Shia Citizens', *Human Rights Watch*, USA, p. 14

²⁷ Erlich, P. (2013) 'In Saudi Arabia, Muslims Challenge Ban on Protests', *National Public Radio* [Online], Available at:

<http://www.npr.org/2013/03/23/175051345/in-saudi-arabia-shiite-muslims-challenge-ban-on-protests> [Accessed on: 8th May 2014]

²⁸ Information supplied to CASS by Hamza al-Hassan, a Saudi dissident and former opposition member now living in the UK, via email on 14th April 2014

²⁹ Matthiesen, T. (2013), *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring That Wasn't*, (Stanford, California: Stanford Briefs), p.73

³⁰ Wilcke, C. (2008) 'Discrimination against Muslims in Saudi Arabia', *The Guardian* [Online], Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/sep/22/religion.islam> [Accessed on: 6th May 2014]

military academies".³¹ This is despite assertions by government officials that there are no official obstacles to Shi'a enrolment.³² Furthermore, there are no Ismailis employed as senior security personnel.³³

A key demand of the Saudi Shi'a opposition has been an end to sectarian discrimination in government employment and representation in main state sectors, including at the ministerial level.³⁴ The under-representation of the Shi'a community in positions of political power, both local and national, is indicative of the wider problems of discrimination and marginalisation that Shi'a citizens experience in Saudi Arabia. Despite some efforts for dialogue made by the Saudi government, Shi'a leaders and the community at large remain effectively excluded from political power in the Kingdom.

The Private Sector

It is harder to find evidence of and document discrimination in the private sector; however, as International Crisis Group argues, it appears that discrimination against Shi'a Muslims is prevalent here also.³⁵ For example, the Ministry of Interior is accused of monitoring the recruitment process for senior positions in the private sector.³⁶ Further evidence for discrimination against Shi'as in the private sector can be found in a refusal by some companies to accommodate Shi'a religious practices. For example, some employers will not allow their Shi'a employees time off work to attend religious observances in the holy month of Muharram or for Ashura. Furthermore, Shi'a businesses are forced to operate in line with the dominant Sunni doctrine. Despite the fact that some Shi'a Muslims will combine two of their five daily prayers, Shi'a businesses are often forced to close during all five prayer times, in accordance with Sunni practices.³⁷

Finally, Saudi Aramco and the oil industry has been accused of discriminating against Shi'as and Shi'a employees. Saudi Aramco has been accused of implementing discriminatory recruitment policies towards Shi'as, ensuring that their work-force is disproportionately weighted towards Sunnis. A former Saudi opposition member claims that mid-level Shi'a workers in Aramco are prevented from advancing beyond a certain level of promotion.³⁸ In addition, Sabak, the largest petro-chemical company in the Middle East, is also accused of discriminatory employment policies towards Shi'as.³⁹

³¹ Human Rights Watch (2009), 'Saudi Arabia: Treat Shia Equally', *Human Rights Watch* [Online] Available at: <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/09/02/saudi-arabia-treat-shia-equally> [Accessed on: 8th May 2014]

³² Human Rights Watch (2009), 'Denied Dignity: Systematic Discrimination and Hostility Toward Saudi Shia Citizens', *Human Rights Watch*, USA, p. 14

³³ Wilcke, C. (2008) 'Discrimination against Muslims in Saudi Arabia', *The Guardian* [Online], Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/sep/22/religion.islam> [Accessed on: 6th May 2014]

³⁴ Matthiesen, T. (2012), 'Saudi Arabia's Shiite Problem', *Foreign Affairs* [Online], Available at: http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/07/saudi_arabia_s_shiite_problem [Accessed on: 2nd May 2014]

³⁵ Crisis Group (2005), 'The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia', *Crisis Group Middle East Report N°45*, Riyadh/Amman/Brussels, p. 10

³⁶ Majidyar, A. K. (2013), 'Saudi Arabia's forgotten Shi'ite Spring', *American Enterprise Institute* [Online], Available at: <http://www.aei.org/outlook/foreign-and-defense-policy/regional/middle-east-and-north-africa/saudi-arabias-forgotten-shiite-spring/> [Accessed on 17th April 2014]

³⁷ United States Department of State (2012), 'Saudi Arabia', *International Religious Freedom Report 2012*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, USA, p. 12

³⁸ Information supplied to CASS by Hamza al-Hassan, a Saudi dissident and former opposition member now living in the UK, via email on 14th April 2014

³⁹ Information supplied to CASS by Hamza al-Hassan, a Saudi dissident and former opposition member now living in the UK, via email on 14th April 2014

Treatment of Employees Allegedly Involved In The Eastern Province Protests

A recent report by Amnesty International details the mistreatment of both public and private sector employees who were accused of involvement in the Eastern Province protests. In the public sector, some employees who were deemed to have been involved in the protests have been penalised through their employers. For example, they have faced deductions in salaries, the loss of any potential raise, as well as dismissal from their jobs altogether.⁴⁰ In other cases, public sector employees have been forced to sign pledges, such as agreeing not to take part in protests again. This, Amnesty argues, violates the employees' rights to freedom of expression.⁴¹ Amnesty has also found evidence of official documents allowing for the dismissal of "the public employee who directs blame or criticism at the policy of the state"; once again this is a curtailment of freedom of speech and expression.⁴²

Within the private sector, employees who were detained under suspicion of involvement with the protests are considered to have taken an unexplained leave of absence and have, therefore, been suspended or fired. Despite efforts by family members and the employees themselves to explain that they were being held in detention, most of these suspensions or terminations have not been lifted. Employees were told that they needed to present official documents to prove that they were being held in detention, which the security services and local government have most often refused to produce. Therefore, as these employees have been unable to prove detention was reason for absence, many have been unable to resume their jobs. At least 6 employees were dismissed from Saudi Aramco in this manner.⁴³

While the report does not state whether these employees were Sunni or Shi'a, considering the demographics of the region and the nature of the protests, it can reasonably be assumed that a significant proportion of those affected were Shi'a citizens.

⁴⁰ Amnesty International (2012), 'Saudi Arabia: Dissident Voices Stifled in the Eastern Province', *Amnesty International Publications*, London, p. 25

⁴¹ Amnesty International (2012), 'Saudi Arabia: Dissident Voices Stifled in the Eastern Province', *Amnesty International Publications*, London, p. 26

⁴² Amnesty International (2012), 'Saudi Arabia: Dissident Voices Stifled in the Eastern Province', *Amnesty International Publications*, London, p. 24

⁴³ Amnesty International (2012), 'Saudi Arabia: Dissident Voices Stifled in the Eastern Province', *Amnesty International Publications*, London, p. 27-8

International Conventions

Saudi Arabia's treatment of Shi'a Muslims in employment and the workplace stand in contravention of several international conventions governing equal treatment, discrimination and labour standards. Saudi Arabia is a member state of both the United Nations and the International Labour Organisation, both of which have conventions addressing the specific issues of religious and minority discrimination.

United Nations:

The following are international conventions adopted by the United Nations Security Council that allow for the protection of minority religions and national groups, which can be applied to the case of discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in Saudi Arabia.

United Nations General Assembly Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981)⁴⁴

Article 2.1: "No one shall be subject to discrimination by any State, institution, group of persons, or person on grounds of religion or other beliefs."⁴⁵

Article 2.2: "'intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief' means any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on religion or belief".⁴⁶

Article 6 (h): The right to "observe days of rest and to celebrate holidays and ceremonies in accordance with the precepts of one's religion or belief."⁴⁷

United Nations General Assembly Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious or Linguistic Minorities (1993)⁴⁸

Article 2.2: "Persons belonging to minorities have the right to participate effectively in cultural, religious, social, economic and public life."⁴⁹

Article 3.2: "No disadvantage shall result for any person belonging to a minority as the consequence of the exercise or non-exercise of the rights set forth in the present Declaration."⁵⁰

⁴⁴ United Nations General Assembly Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (adopted 25th November 1981)

⁴⁵ United Nations General Assembly Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (adopted 25th November 1981), Article 2.1

⁴⁶ United Nations General Assembly Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (adopted 25th November 1981), Article 2.2

⁴⁷ United Nations General Assembly Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (adopted 25th November 1981), Article 6 (h)

⁴⁸ United Nations General Assembly Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (adopted 18th December 1992)

⁴⁹ United Nations General Assembly Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (adopted 18th December 1992), Article 2.2

International Labour Organisation

One of the two of the core ILO Conventions deal with discrimination: ILO Convention no. 111 'Discrimination (Employment and Occupation)'⁵¹ and ILO Convention no. 100 'Equal Remuneration'⁵². Saudi Arabia is a signatory to both of these conventions.

ILO Convention no. 111 'Discrimination (Employment and Occupation)'⁵³

Article Two: "Each Member for which this Convention is in force undertakes to declare and pursue a national policy designed to promote, by methods appropriate to national conditions and practice, equality of opportunity and treatment in respect of employment and occupation, with a view to eliminating any discrimination in respect thereof."⁵⁴

Article 24 of the ILO Constitution allows for industrial associations of employers or of workers to make a representation against any ILO member that it believes to have failed to satisfactorily observed any Convention to which it is party.⁵⁵ Saudi Arabia's treatment of Shi'a Muslims is in clear violation of this convention. However, no representations have been made against Saudi Arabia under Article 24.⁵⁶

Trade Unions and Collective Action:

Saudi Arabia has not signed up to the two ILO conventions relating to freedom of association: Convention no. 87 'Freedom of Associating and Protection of the Right to Organise' and Convention no. 98 'Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining'. These conventions affirm the right of all workers and employees to "freely form and join groups for the support and advancement of their occupational interests"⁵⁷ as well as the right to collective bargaining⁵⁸. According to these conventions, "Freedom of association means that workers and employers can set up, join and run their own organisations without interference from the State or one another."⁵⁹

⁵⁰ United Nations General Assembly Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (adopted 18th December 1992), Article 3.2

⁵¹ International Labour Organisation Convention no. 111 on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) (adopted 25th June 1958, entered into force 15th July 1960)

⁵² International Labour Organisation Convention no. 100 on Equal Remuneration (adopted 29th June 1951, entered into force 23rd May 1953)

⁵³ International Labour Organisation Convention no. 111 on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) (adopted 25th June 1958, entered into force 15th July 1960)

⁵⁴ International Labour Organisation Convention no. 111 on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) (adopted 25th June 1958, entered into force 15th July 1960), Article 2

⁵⁵ Constitution of the International Labour Organisation (adopted 1st April 1919, entry into force 28th June 1928), Article 24

⁵⁶ International Labour Organisation, 'Representations (Art. 24)', *International Labour Organisation* [Online], Available at: http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:50010:0::NO::P50010_ARTICLE_NO:24 [Accessed on: 25th April 2014]

⁵⁷ The International Labour Organisation (2003) 'The International Labour Organisation's Fundamental Conventions', *ILO* [Online], Available at: http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms_095895.pdf [Accessed on 24th April 2014], p. 9

⁵⁸ The International Labour Organisation (2003) 'The International Labour Organisation's Fundamental Conventions', *ILO* [Online], Available at: http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms_095895.pdf [Accessed on 24th April 2014], p. 10

⁵⁹ The International Labour Organisation (2003) 'The International Labour Organisation's Fundamental Conventions', *ILO* [Online], Available at: http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms_095895.pdf [Accessed on 24th April 2014], p. 9

Trade unions, strikes and collective bargaining are not permitted in Saudi Arabia; therefore, dismissed employees are severely limited in the action they can take against their employers. According to the International Trade Union Convention, 'Workers' Committees' are allowed, but only with the participation of the employer and the government.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ International Trade Union Confederation (2012), 'Internationally Recognised Core Labour Standards in Saudi Arabia: Report for the WTO General Council Review of the Trade Policies of Saudi Arabia', Geneva, p. 1

Conclusions

Shi'a Muslims in Saudi Arabia are routinely discriminated against in everyday life, including in employment and the workplace. This employment discrimination has not been widely reported upon but is a violation of human rights that has become a normalised part of life in Saudi Arabia. Anti-Shi'a discrimination is ideologically and theologically supported by the dominant Wahhabi doctrine and is perpetuated through anti-Shi'a attitudes in education. There is a significant lack of Shi'a Muslims in positions of power, especially in the local and national government as well as the security services. Shi'as face barriers to promotion in both the public and private sector, especially in the oil industry. Employees who were involved in political protests in the Eastern Province – a significant Shi'a area - in 2011 have been subjected to pay cuts, forced to sign declarations and even dismissed from their jobs. Therefore, the Shi'a Muslims of Saudi Arabia face restrictions in their choice of job, their ability to get a promotion and their access to higher education.

Discrimination against Shi'a Muslims is a part of a wider pattern of labour discrimination that is evident in Saudi Arabia. Other religious and ethnic minorities are also discriminated against in the Kingdom, as well as the shocking maltreatment of migrant workers that has been documented. Such discrimination indicates a severe lack of respect for the principles of human rights, labour standards, fairness and equality. This is directly at odds with the values advanced and protected by the United Nations and the International Labour Organisation, both of which Saudi Arabia is a member. Saudi Arabia has shown repeated and severe disregard for many international conventions on equality and discrimination, including the UN General Assembly Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981) and ILO Convention Number 111 on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation'.

Furthermore, by banning all forms of trade unions and collective bargaining, Saudi Arabia has denied Shi'as the means through which they can seek help in appealing against cases of discrimination. Shi'a employees are at the mercy of their employers and the government, with little protection against violations of international or national labour standards. The ban on trade unions also significantly hinders the ability of Shi'a employees in Saudi Arabia to make representations to international organisations, such as the ILO, to challenge the discrimination they face.

Saudi Arabia must take urgent action to address the discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in employment and the workplace. Shi'as should have equal access to all employment opportunities and should not be restricted in their ability to progress in their career. The Saudi government must work to include more Shi'as in local and national government, as well as in the military and security services. No employee or job applicant should be discriminated against because of their religion or belief and the Saudi government must work to enforce this basic human right.

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