

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

Institutionalised and normalised discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in Saudi Arabia is facilitated through overt government directives, tacit exclusion and a lack of access to effective channels of worker representation and protection.

#### The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia

- Approximately 10-15% (2.4 million) of the Saudi Muslim population is Shi'a.<sup>1</sup>
- There is a large concentration of Shi'as in the Kingdom's Eastern Provinces, particularly in the oases of Qatif and Al-Hasa.
- Recently protests in the eastern provinces, inspired by the Arab Spring, led to heavy-handed repression from the government<sup>2</sup> and the detention of numerous protestors, mostly Shi'a.

#### Lack of Shi'as in prominent positions or positions of power

- One key area where there is evidence of anti-Shi'a discrimination is in the absence of Shi'as in prominent positions of power – observers accuse the Saudi government of deliberate and tacit policies of exclusion and marginalisation of Shi'as.
- There are no Shi'a cabinet ministers or high-ranking government officials.<sup>3</sup>
- One former member of the Saudi opposition claims that of the 150 members appointed to the Shura Council (The Consultative Assembly) – the formal advisory board to the monarchy - by the King, only 5 are Shi'a.<sup>4</sup>
- Shi'a students are generally refused admission to military academies, despite government assertions that there are no official obstacles to Shi'a enrolment.<sup>5</sup>

*There is a significant lack of Shi'as in prominent positions and positions of power in Saudi Arabia, such as the government, the military and the private sector.*

*Trade unions, collective bargaining and strikes are not permitted in the Kingdom – severely restricting employees' ability to challenge discrimination in the work place.*

- In the private sector, recruitment of senior positions is closely monitored by the Ministry of Interior and, once again, Shi'as are under-represented in this area.<sup>6</sup>
- Aramco, the major American-Saudi oil company in Saudi Arabia, is accused of operating discriminatory recruitment policies that excludes Shi'a Muslims and limits promotion.<sup>7</sup>

#### Discrimination in the work place

- Anecdotal evidence suggests that Shi'as are refused exemption from work to celebrate Shi'a religious festivals, such as Ashura? Reference for this
- A recent *Amnesty International* report claims that public and private employees in the Eastern Provinces have faced dismissal, reductions in pay and loss of pay increases as a result of participating in the peaceful anti-government protests.<sup>8</sup> 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 be assumed that a significant proportion of those affected were Shi'a.

#### International labour conventions

- Discrimination against Shi'as in Saudi Arabia contravenes several conventions on international labour and human rights standards, including but not limited to:
  - International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1969)<sup>9</sup> – Saudi Arabia is a signatory
  - UN General Assembly Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981).<sup>10</sup>
  - ILO Convention no. 111 on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation)<sup>11</sup> – Saudi Arabia is a signatory
- Saudi Arabia has not ratified either of the two ILO conventions on trade unions and collective bargaining (ILO Conventions 87 and 98).<sup>12</sup> Therefore trade unions, collective bargaining and strikes are not permitted in the Kingdom, severely restricting employees' ability to challenge discrimination in the work place.

A full report on discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in the Saudi work place is to follow soon.

## References

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2. Amnesty International (2013), 'Saudi Arabia', *Annual Report 2013*, Available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/saudi-arabia/report-2013> [Accessed on: 17th April 2014]
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4. Information supplied to CASS by Hamza al-Hassan, a Saudi dissident and former opposition member now living in the UK
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6. Majidiyar, 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 17<sup>th</sup> April 2014]
7. Information supplied to CASS by Hamza al-Hassan, a Saudi dissident and former opposition member now living in the UK
8. Amnesty International (2012), 'Saudi Arabia: Dissident Voices Stifled in the Eastern Province', *Amnesty International Publications*, London
9. United Nations International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (adopted 21<sup>st</sup> December 1965, entered into force 4<sup>th</sup> January 1969)
10. 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)
11. International Labour Organisation Convention no. 111 on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) (adopted 25<sup>th</sup> June 1958, entered into force 15<sup>th</sup> July 1960)
12. International Labour Organisation Convention no. 87 on Freedom of Association and Protection of the Rights to Organise (adopted 9<sup>th</sup> July 1948, entered into force 4<sup>th</sup> July 1950); International Labour Organisation Convention no. 98 on Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining (adopted 1<sup>st</sup> July 1949, entered into force 18<sup>th</sup> July 1951)

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