

The Saudi Slave Masters

Mir Ahmed Ali

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“My kingdom will survive only in so far as it remains a country difficult of access, where the foreigner will have no other aim, with his task fulfilled, but to get out.” —Attributed to King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud (1876-1953)

Today the monarchy controls petroleum resources; the private sector economy is driven by the production of foreign workers. Saudi Arabia abolished slavery in 1962, but not everyone got the memo. One third of the population are now foreign workers who hail from poorer countries, primarily in southeast Asia. Under the sponsorship labor system, the worker is recruited by a specific employer before emigration, and depends on continuing good will.

Laxity in enforcement of labor law has brought about an epidemic of nonpayment, underpayment, and slow-payment. Owners of factories or construction companies feel justified in stiffing their foreign labor force, but they have a positive record of following the Qur-an's call to support charity. Ali asserts that madrasas are the leading beneficiaries of those redirected paychecks.

When a complaint is lodged, employers confiscate the suing non-paid employees' passports, but can themselves leave the country at will and may be excused from attending court proceedings. A system reluctant to force employers to pay their employees does show a number of recent judgements favoring the unpaid. Ali aptly explains the apparent randomness of case outcomes as the net effect of the competing interests of four institutions. Judges do not work from precedent, but rely on a Wahhabist version of Shariah Law, with a few Bedouin tribal practices incorporated. Their dispensations vary between individuals, from just to vindictive. The government's Labor Ministry, appointed by the king, is currently “...between the fire and the frying pan.” Public opinion pulls them gradually toward more progressive policies, but the monarchy cannot risk invoking the opposition of the morality police, called Al-Mutaween, and they don't want much permanent immigration. A separate legislative body, the Majlis-e-Shoura may help or hinder unpaid or abused foreign workers.

The women's horror stories are heart-rendering. Maids work without contracts and outside the purview of the Labor Ministry. They are beaten and impregnated. To be not a Saudi citizen, not Wahhabi Muslim, and not male is to lack all statuses of protection. The plight of runaway maids is so common that several cities have established special shelters for them.

Mir Ahmed Ali's twenty-two years as a skilled foreign worker in management of geotechnical firms give him great authority. *The Saudi Slave Masters* presents relentless parade of anecdotes about work without compensation, wrongful imprisonment, and gender oppression. The facts of cases were culled from sources such as the *Arab News* and Human Rights Watch. Ali's succinct account of the kingdom's formation is helpful background, as is his wide view on the history of the slave trade. The deplorable practice is still at large in the world.

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