

SAUDI ARABIA'S APARTHEID AND OPPRESSION

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A pivotal theme in current Islamic political discourse is a demand for justice, a key tenet of the Quran. A popular complaint in Islamic political argument is discrimination against Muslims in the west such as the ban of the veil in European countries, minarets in Switzerland or racial profiling in many western countries. Unfortunately, there is a conspicuous lack of looking inwards to practices within Muslim countries. Muslims from all over the world have just completed the annual pilgrimage, the Hajj in Saudi Arabia. The Hajj represents a critical pillar of Islam and is supposed to represent a universal gathering of Muslims, which transcends race, ethnicity, colour or any other distinction. Muslims are supposed to meet in the sacred precincts surrounding the holy city of Mecca as equals wearing the same simple clothing meant to symbolize perfect brotherhood, where individuals or groups do not see themselves as separate entities and differences of lineage, tribe or race have no bearing.

The experiences of the Hajj are very different depending on which part of the world you originate from. If you hail from Saudi Arabia or the Gulf states, you will perform the hajj in relative luxury and privilege, which is denied to Muslims from the sub-continent, Africa or the rest of the world. Those from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states have a different Hajj based on luxurious accommodations, and preferential treatment in performing the rituals. The latest egregious practice is the high-speed rail service, which transports the pilgrims from Mecca to

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the sacred sites where the rituals of the Hajj are performed. The train is reserved only for Saudis and citizens from the Gulf countries [1]. Citizens from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries can be transported to the holy sites within a few minutes. For others, they will have to take the bus or walk which could take many hours each day. I cannot think of any other place in the world today that practices such crass racism. Imagine a train in the United States that states no Arabs - just people from the west - can ride in. The real tragedy is the lack of outrage from Muslims.

The Hajj as a gathering of Muslims, based on equality, simplicity and brotherhood is a fiction. The Hajj is a gigantic money making endeavour. All visits to the holy place have to take place under the auspices of a Saudi institution or company, which is totally Saudi-owned. Every opportunity is geared towards profit maximization. The Saudi companies in turn enter into agreements with parties in the local country where the pilgrim resides. The Saudi company takes care of the negotiation with the local hotels and other parties to organize and pay for the accommodations and internal transportation and the like. Saudis have profited greatly from the pilgrims who have been exploited on a scale that is beyond imagination. A two week visit to Saudi Arabia during the Hajj period (if you are not sponsored) in modest accommodations costs more than a month-long world tour (not counting the fact that for five days during the two week period, the pilgrim is staying in a tent). Imagine the outrage if a Saudi was told that he could not do business in the United States of America (including booking a hotel) except through a United States of America entity?

Saudi Arabia represents one of the worse examples of a stratified society at the apex of which sits the descendants of its founder Ibn Saud constituted in the current royal family. And then appears a pecking order based on lineage or clan and others recognized as Saudi. Then come hundreds of thousands of individuals (including second and third generation Saudi born), followed by hundreds of thousands of foreign guest workers.

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The sum total of rights and privileges enjoyed - be it access to jobs, education, access to property, welfare benefits or the performance of the Hajj depends upon where one belongs in the pecking order. Those at the top enjoy considerable rights and power over those at the bottom. The most affected group is the foreign worker, particularly the foreign woman worker. These guest workers operate under a kafeel (master) to whom many are indebted for years, a situation that invites trafficking in people and a relationship akin to slavery. Over the past few days, we have been informed about several incidents of abuse of foreign guest workers from Indonesia [2] in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. Where is the outrage from Muslims and their scholars? Each year, thousands of female workers seek protection at foreign embassies from abuse and rape. International human rights groups and others have documented the rampant abuse, lack of fair trial standards, denial of freedom of movement, forced labour approaching conditions of slavery and beating of foreign workers. Also documented is the weak judicial system, which offers little protection to those at the bottom, rung of society. The judicial system gives more credence to the wealthy and locals in disputes involving foreigners.

Islamic law derived from the sayings of the prophet Mohammad articulates a vision of human dignity (in ways analogous to modern human rights) in stating "No Arab has any superiority over a non-Arab, nor does a non-Arab have any superiority over an Arab; nor has a white man any superiority over a black man, or the black many any superiority over the white man. You are all the children of Adam, and Adam was created from Clay". Conspicuously absent are protests among Muslims about racism, racial discrimination, gender discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance prevalent in so many Muslim countries starting with the cradle of Islam, Saudi Arabia.