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Center for Research on Globalization

Gulf allies: A Record of Repression and Torture – Part 1: Saudi Arabia

US State Department human rights reports

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Global Research, April 20, 2011
World Socialist Web Site 20 April 2011

Region: Middle East & North Africa
Theme: Police State & Civil Rights

The US State Department recently released its "2010 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices." This year's annual report provides details on human rights conditions in over 190 countries. Included are reports on the member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which represents the US-backed monarchies of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and Kuwait.

This Saudi-dominated alliance backed the imposition of a no-fly zone in Libya, and has provided key support for the attack on Libya by the United States and European powers. The GCC has also provided military and police personnel to put down insurrections against the repressive regimes in Bahrain and Yemen.

While the US seeks to cloak its imperialist assault on Libya in "humanitarian" terms, its allies in the GCC are guilty of widespread violations of human rights and practice repression and torture in their own countries. In the coming days, this WSWS series will examine these human rights abuses as documented in the State Department reports. This first installment covers Saudi Arabia.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a monarchy ruled by the Al Saud family. Since 2005, the Saudi population of about 28.5 million has been ruled by King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud.

The monarchy rules with dictatorial powers under its interpretation of Sharia (Islamic law) and the 1992 Basic Law, providing the ruling family with absolute powers. These powers are wielded against the monarchy's political opponents, and in particular against non-citizens.

According to the US State Department's 2010 report, the following "significant human rights problems" were reported:

"No right to change the government peacefully; torture and physical abuse; poor prison and detention center conditions; arbitrary arrest and incommunicado detention; denial of fair and public trials and lack of due process in the judicial system; political prisoners; restrictions on civil liberties such as freedoms of speech (including the Internet), assembly, association, movement, and severe restrictions on religious freedom; and corruption and lack of government transparency.

“Violence against women and a lack of equal rights for women, violations of the rights of children, trafficking in persons, and discrimination on the basis of gender, religion, sect, and ethnicity were common. The lack of workers’ rights, including the employment sponsorship system, remained a severe problem.”

Executions, torture, prison conditions

While closed-door hearings made it impossible to determine whether the accused were granted due process in capital cases, there were reports that the government killed civilians in conflict last year. The regime executed 26 people in 2010, all by beheading; 67 were executed in 2009, 102 in 2008.

Although security forces report to civilian authorities, they operate with impunity at the direction of the monarchy. According to press reports, in December 2009, Saudi forces killed 54 civilians, mostly Yemeni, in the border town of Al-Nadheer. In June 2009, Abdullah al-Rumian, a Saudi militant extracted from Iraq, reportedly died in custody.

There were numerous reports of prisoners and detainees being subjected to torture and other physical abuse. Yemeni Sultan Muhammad Abdo Doais, 32, reportedly died in the Qassim prison after being held incommunicado for four years.

Suliman al-Reshoudi, now 73, a member of the NGO Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), has been held in solitary confinement for three years as punishment for his human rights advocacy. According to the State Department report, “ACPRA says he has been subjected to ‘severe physical and psychological tortures,’ including tying his feet to a bed frame with two separate chains and being forced into a sitting position throughout the day and shackled at night.”

The Saudi Gazette reported that a Qatif court sentenced two third-grade students to six months’ imprisonment and 120 lashes for stealing examination papers.

No independent human rights observers were allowed to visit Saudi prisons in 2010. Pretrial detainees are held with convicted prisoners, and there are no ombudsmen to act on behalf of prisoners and detainees. All forces with arrest power report to the Ministry of Interior (MOI), which maintains broad powers to arrest and detain people indefinitely, without judicial oversight, in many cases for weeks, months or even years.

Riots took place in January and September at the Women’s Correction Center in Mecca, with prisoners complaining of no access to medical care, no family visits, unhygienic food and physical assaults.

The daily newspaper Al-Watan reported August 25 on the deaths of five Ethiopians, who suffocated due to overcrowding in the Jizan Deportation Center.

In accordance with Sharia, court proceedings may be closed at the judge’s discretion. According to the Law of Criminal Procedure, there is neither presumption of innocence nor trial by jury. The court presents all witnesses and there is no defense access to government-held evidence.

In 2008, the government established a Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) to handle cases of alleged terror suspects. The SCC has tried 330 persons, almost exclusively in closed trials.

Seven people were acquitted, and the sentences for those convicted ranged from fines to the death penalty.

Absence of civil liberties

The government strictly monitors all political activity and takes punitive action against those who appear to oppose its policies. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), In November 2009 the Saudi domestic intelligence service arrested Munir Jassas, a Shia government critic. He told his wife he had been arrested and held in solitary confinement as punishment for writings on the Internet. He remained in detention at the end of 2010.

All public employees are forbidden from "participating, directly or indirectly, in the preparation of any document, speech, or petition; engaging in dialogue with local and foreign media; or participating in any meetings intended to oppose the state's policies."

The government owns or directly influences print and broadcast media as well as book publication. The Law of Printed Materials and Publication, the report notes, "governs printed materials; printing presses; bookstores; import, rent, and sale of films; television and radio; and foreign media offices and their correspondents. All media activities are subject to the MOI's prior censorship and licensing requirements."

The Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC) monitors email, Internet chat rooms, and blocks sites it deems incompatible with Sharia and government regulations. According to Reporters Without Borders, authorities claim to have blocked 400,000 web sites.

Abu Dhabi newspaper the National reported June 15 on the arrest and imprisonment, without formal charges, of human rights activist Mekhlet bin Daham al-Shammary. His prison file indicated that his alleged crime was "annoying others," as a result of holding unlicensed political meetings, which are illegal. He remained in prison at year's end.

The 2007 Law to Fight Cyber Crime imposes up to 10 years' imprisonment and a 4.7 million riyal ($1.3 million) fine for creation or dissemination of a web site deemed "terrorist" or for communicating with leaders of terrorist organizations.

The 1992 Basic Law provides no freedom of association and prohibits the establishment of political parties or groups the government considers as opposing or challenging the regime.

Religious freedom is neither recognized nor protected under law. Sunni Islam is the official religion, and other religions, including those of the Shia minority, Christians and Jews, face persecution. Public religious practice of non-Muslims is banned; atheism is outlawed.

There are no provisions for freedom of movement within the country, foreign travel, emigration or repatriation. All male citizens over the age of 15 must hold a national identity card (NIC). During 2010, for political reasons the government revoked the right of some citizens to travel outside the country, with no notification and without the right to contest the restriction.

The NIC is optional for women, and a woman may only be issued one with the consent of her male guardian. Women are prohibited from driving motor vehicles. Government authorities and male family members can "blacklist" women and children from leaving the country, in custody disputes and under other circumstances.

The Basic Law dictates that the “state will grant political asylum if public interest so dictates.” Saudi Arabia is not a signatory to either the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. Basic services such as health care and social services are provided to citizens only.

The monarchy enforces an Arab League directive against naturalizing the estimated 500,000 Palestinians residing in Saudi Arabia, on the spurious grounds that they will not “lose their Palestinian identity” and will “preserve their right to return.”

Elections and political representation

Under the Basic Law, the monarchy is the political system. The king appoints the Allegiance Commission, composed of 34 senior princes, to select a king or crown prince upon either’s death or incapacitation. The king appoints all other ministers.

The Municipal Advisory Council is the only elected government body, and only male, nonmilitary citizens 21 years and older are eligible to vote. In elections to the council in 2005, the first since 1965, only 10 to 15 percent of eligible voters participated. There were no independent observers and the king appointed half of the council seats. The 2009 elections to the council were postponed.

Women’s and children’s rights

Women are not afforded the rights of men, and there are no laws criminalizing violence against women. Rape is punishable under Sharia, with penalties ranging from flogging to execution, but under the government’s interpretation of Islamic law, courts overwhelmingly punish both the victim and the perpetrator. Spousal rape is not recognized.

Most rape cases go unreported because victims fear prosecution, societal reprisal, diminished marriage opportunities, accusations of adultery, or possible imprisonment. A female rape victim is most often held at fault for illegal “mixing of genders.”

NGO Migrants Rights reported the case of a Filipina who claimed to have been raped by a Bangladeshi coworker. She was arrested and detained at Hafer Al Baten Central Jail for having an illicit affair. Her employer contacted the government to have her repatriated.

According to HRW, Aisha Ali, a divorced mother of three, was confined, beaten and forced into five marriages to which she did not consent. She was placed by authorities in a temporary shelter for three months, but was then returned to her brothers.

The human rights group also reported the case of Sawsan Salim, who was sentenced to 300 lashes and one-and-a-half years in prison for filing “spurious” harassment complaints against government officials in court and for “visiting government offices without a male guardian.” One of the two ruling judges in her case was one of the officials she had accused of harassment.

Women face discrimination in court, where their testimony counts for half that of a man. Law prohibits women from marrying non-Muslims, but men may marry Christians and Jews. While women must demonstrate legally specified grounds for divorce, men can obtain divorce without providing cause. In custody disputes, after children attain a certain age, the divorced husband or his family are awarded custody.

Sharia suggests that girls may marry upon reaching puberty, and religious authorities in Saudi Arabia authorize girls as young as 10 to be married. Such marriages are sometimes arranged by families, without consent of the girl, particularly in rural areas and often to settle debts.

There are no specific laws governing penalties related to child prostitution, statutory rape, or consensual age for sex. Saudi Arabia is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction.

Cultural norms require women to wear an abaya (a loose-fitting, full-length black cloak) in public, and to conceal their hair.

Discrimination and Workers Rights

While racial discrimination is illegal, in practice members of national, racial and ethnic, and tribal minorities confront widespread discrimination. Foreign workers from Africa and Asia are particularly affected. These include numerous reports of assaults against foreign workers.

Under Sharia, sexual activity between two persons of the same gender is punishable by death or flogging. Okaz reported a Jeddah court sentencing a man, already imprisoned, to 500 lashes, five additional years in jail and a 50,000 riyal ($13,000) fine for “committing homosexual acts.”

The regime’s labor law does not address the right of workers to form and join independent unions, and there are no labor unions in the country. In workplaces with more than 100 employees, the government allows the formation of citizen-only “labor committees” with restrictions on the right to association. Workers choose the committee members, but they are subject to Ministry of Labor approval.

Labor law does not protect collective bargaining. There is no provision for legal strikes in Saudi Arabia, and law does not prohibit retaliation against workers who strike.

Although labor law does set forth working conditions and pay, including for children, there have been numerous reports of forced or compulsory labor, particularly among children and migrant workers.

Non-citizens may reside or work in Saudi Arabia only under the sponsorship of a citizen or business. According to Human Rights Watch, in 2010, there were some 1.5 million foreign domestic workers in the country, the majority of them women. While labor law prohibits forced labor, with fines and bans on future hiring by the sponsor, these laws do not apply to domestic employees, the largest group of workers susceptible to forced labor.

Last year, hundreds of foreign domestic workers sought shelter at their embassies, fleeing sexual abuse and other violence and conditions amounting to bondage. Criminal charges against their abusive employers were rarely filed.

Children from poor Saudi families are forced into labor in the form of begging, and foreign children are trafficked into the country specifically for this purpose. During the year, there were a reported 9,520 child beggars, undoubtedly an underestimation. In particular, children from Yemen and Ethiopia are forced against their will into child begging rings, street vending and Saudi family businesses.

To be continued.

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