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Saudi Arabia backs religious tolerance - except at home

Human Rights Watch (01.08.2013) - Saudi Arabia's deputy foreign minister, Prince Abdulaziz bin Abdullah, last year hailed an agreement to establish a centre for inter-religious dialogue in Vienna, stating it would "work for establishing peace and justice and prevent misuse of religion for oppression and violence". King Abdullah himself sponsored a conference for religious dialogue in Madrid attended by representatives of seven major world religions. Quoting a Qur'anic verse, the king told the delegates: "God's will, praise be to Him, was that people should differ in their faiths. If the Almighty had so desired, all mankind would have shared the same religion."

These are noble ideas, but judging from the treatment of the Saudi activist and blogger Raif Badawi, the king's stated goal of religious tolerance applies only to those outside the kingdom's borders. On July 29, a Saudi court convicted Badawi of insulting Islam, saying he had founded a "liberal" website and had insulted religion and religious authorities in television interviews. He was sentenced to 600 lashes and seven years in prison. Though Badawi has the opportunity to appeal, there is little hope that authorities will drop the verdict.

Saudi Arabia, whose legal system is based on uncodified principles of Islamic law, leaves judges largely free to decide what actions, in their view, constitute certain crimes, including serious offenses, such as insulting religion, as well as the appropriate punishments. The results of such a system are unsurprisingly arbitrary and unfair. In fact, local activists say that Badawi's sentence – for establishing a website and peacefully expressing his opinions – is harsher than some sentences for Saudis convicted of terrorism-related offenses.

Shortly after the announcement of the verdict, I asked Badawi's lawyer, Waleed Abu al-Khair, how the judge determined that Badawi's activities constituted an insult to religion. He told me that criminal court judge Faris al-Harbi noted simply that Badawi had created a "liberal" website, and said that "liberalism is akin to unbelief". Expressing sympathy with liberal ideas in Saudi Arabia is apparently all it takes to be jailed and flogged for a religious offense.

Badawi has also faced societal censure for his views. In 2012, the well-known religious cleric Abdulrahman al-Barrak denounced Badawi as an apostate, effectively sanctioning his murder. And Badawi's own father has vigorously condemned him on television shows and in media interviews, saying that his son should be punished. Badawi says he has never attacked Islam, any other religion, or people of religious faith. He has repeatedly said that he merely sought to encourage honest and open debate on religious and political matters in Saudi Arabia, such as the blatant abuses of the Saudi religious police

and the use of religion to silence peaceful dissidents and those whose religious opinions differ from those sanctioned by government.

He also campaigned to rescue his sister, Samar Badawi, from domestic abuse. She fled to a Jeddah women's shelter to escape the abuse. Badawi fought to get her out of prison after their father used the criminal justice system to jail her for seven months on the charge of "parental disobedience" – yet another 'crime' whose determination is left wholly to the discretion of individual judges.

Saudi authorities use religion as a tool of oppression in all too many instances. One is the case of Hamza Kashgari, who has sat in a jail cell without charge or trial since February 2012 for three tweets that authorities alleged were insulting to the Prophet Mohammed. Authorities also jailed the well-regarded Saudi novelist Turki al-Hamad in December 2012 after he tweeted a series of comments on religion, finally releasing him in June without charge. These cases demonstrate why the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has recommended Saudi Arabia as a Tier One Country of Particular Concern, stating that "the government privileges its own interpretation of Sunni Islam over all other interpretations...and continues to imprison individuals for apostasy, blasphemy, and sorcery."

It is hard to imagine how such a horrendous record on religious freedom squares with the kingdom's stated policy of promoting interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance around the world. If the Saudi government intends to have any credibility in fostering religious dialogue and harmony, it must first put an immediate end to invoking religion to punish those who peacefully advocate principles and ideas that the government does not share. The Saudi deputy foreign minister is right – religion should never be used to justify violence and oppression. But to seriously tackle this issue, he needs to look closer to home.

Lash and jail for Saudi web activist

***Raef Badawi Raef Badawi was facing a possible death sentence for apostasy
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A Saudi online activist has been jailed for seven years and sentenced to 600 lashes for urging religious liberalisation, his lawyer has said.

The activist, Raef Badawi, co-founded the Free Saudi Liberals website, an online forum for public debate.

He was arrested last year and convicted on Monday of setting up a website that undermined general security.

Amnesty International considers Mr Badawi a political prisoner and has called for his immediate release.

Mr Badawi was originally charged with apostasy, or abandonment of religion, a crime in Saudi Arabia that carries with it the death penalty.

Lawyer Waleed Abu Alkhair told the BBC that Mr Badawi, a father of three, had confirmed in court that he was a Muslim but told the judge "everyone has a choice to believe or not believe."

He was convicted of the charges of setting up a website that undermines general security and of ridiculing religious figures.

The judge ordered that the 600 lashes be administered 150 at a time.

Mr Alkhair said the charges were over comments the activist posted calling for a relaxation of Saudi Arabia's strict interpretation of Islam.

The lawyer said the sentence was unduly harsh.

"The lashes could be spread out but in Sharia this is a sign that the judge wants to insult him," he said.

His lawyer said he will appeal against the decision.

Christian conversion of woman results in lashing and prison sentence for Lebanese and Saudi men

Reuters (14.05.2013) - A court in Saudi Arabia has sentenced two men to lashes and prison terms for converting a woman to Christianity and helping her flee the conservative Islamic kingdom, the Saudi Gazette reported on Monday.

A Lebanese man was sentenced to six years in prison and 300 lashes for converting the woman, while a Saudi man was sentenced to two years and 200 lashes for aiding her escape abroad, the English-language daily said. It added that the pair had challenged the verdict and would appeal.

A spokesman at the justice ministry could not immediately be reached for comment.

In Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, it is against the law for Muslims to abandon their faith, a practice known as apostasy. Proselytising for other religions or practicing them openly is also illegal.

Judges have considerable leeway in how to interpret the kingdom's Sharia code of Islamic law and are not bound by sentencing guidelines or a system of precedent. Both capital and corporal punishment are legal.

The case emerged last year after the woman's family complained that she had been "brainwashed" by colleagues at the insurance company where she worked and that they had helped her leave Saudi Arabia via Bahrain on false documents.

The woman, whose name has not been released, was granted asylum in Sweden last year, the newspaper reported.

Last year King Abdullah, who has promoted limited reforms since coming to the throne in 2005, opened a center for religious dialogue in Vienna that drew criticism because of Saudi Arabia's own lack of religious freedom. In 2008 he sponsored an inter-faith conference in Spain.

Saudi Arabia arrests 53 Ethiopian Christians at private worship service

WEA (11.02.2013) - Saudi authorities on Feb. 8 arrested 53 Ethiopian Christians, mostly women, who were attending a worship service in the private, rented home of an Ethiopian believer in Dammam, the capital of the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, WEA-RLC has learnt from sources inside the Arab kingdom.

The Christians - 46 women and six men including three church leaders - were arrested at about 10 a.m. last Friday, a close relative of one of those arrested told WEA-RLC. The three church leaders - two of them women - were produced in an Islamic court in Dammam the same day when authorities alleged they were converting Muslims to Christianity, the source added.

Authorities are likely to release two of the Ethiopian Christians who have residential permits on Monday, and the others are expected to be deported.

Dammam, a center for petroleum and natural gas and all commerce in the eastern parts of the kingdom, is a large metropolitan, industrial area and a major seaport. However, religious freedom is not granted to the numerous visitors or expats in the region, like elsewhere in the nation. A Saudi girl who embraced Christianity and fled Dammam in September 2012 was granted asylum in Sweden last month, according to Al-Yaum newspaper.

In December 2011, Saudi authorities arrested 35 Ethiopian Christians, 29 of them women, for "illicit mingling," after police arrested them when they raided a private prayer gathering in Jeddah. Of those arrested 29 were women, who were subjected to arbitrary body cavity searches in custody, according to Human Rights Watch.

"We call on Saudi authorities to treat all those arrested with dignity, and release them immediately as there is apparently no evidence for any offense against them," Godfrey Yogarajah, WEA-RLC Executive Director, said. "Arrest of believers for peacefully gathering for worship goes against the spirit of Saudi Arabia's promotion of inter-religious dialogue in international fora."

More than 10 years since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, the Saudi government has failed to implement a number of promised reforms related to promoting freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief, noted the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom in its 2012 annual report.

"The Saudi government persists in banning all forms of public religious expression other than that of the government's own interpretation of one school of Sunni Islam; prohibits churches, synagogues, temples, and other non-Muslim places of worship; uses in its schools and posts online state textbooks that continue to espouse intolerance and incite violence; and periodically interferes with private religious practice," the report said.

Indian Christian calls on Saudi Arabia to recognise migrants' religious rights

Detained and arrested in 2004 on false proselytising charges, Brian O'Connor appeals for openness. In his view, granting religious rights to non-Muslims would be a "positive change" for the country. A study by the Centre for

Development Studies indicates that the children of Indian migrants "grow up confused," which may manifest itself "in rebellion, school absenteeism, drop-outs and substance abuse".

AsiaNews (10.01.2013) - "Saudi Arabia should grant Christian migrants religious freedom as well as the right to build churches in the country. The public value of religion must be recognised as every human being's right to self-fulfilment," said Brian O'Connor in an appeal made through *AsiaNews*.

In 2004, the Christian from India was held in a Saudi jail, [in chains, tortured for seven months and seven days](#) for alleged proselytising. Released after an international campaign on his behalf to which *AsiaNews* participated, he said that "recognising this right would be a positive change for the whole country."

In a country that does not recognise or protect any religion other than Islam, "Indian migrants worship in the privacy of their homes," O'Connor said. "However, they are often victims of raids and arrests by the Muttawa, the religious police. It is urgent and essential that Indian Christians and Hindus, as well as other non-Muslim migrants be granted the right to worship freely without discrimination and persecution."

A new study, *Migration Report 2013 - Social Cost of Migration*, will be presented next Monday in Kochi (Kerala). Written by Irudayan Nayan, from the Centre for Development Studies, the paper was commissioned by the research unit on international migration of the Ministry of Overseas' Indian Affairs. Its focus is on the Indian Diaspora in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East.

According to its findings, Saudi Arabia continues to be the desired destination among low- and semi-skilled workers from India. However, "In the absence of adequate parental guidance, children grow up confused and this may manifest itself in rebellion, school absenteeism, drop-outs and substance abuse".

The most painful and tangible social cost of migration is in fact the separation of children from parents, the study found, adding that the absence of mothers, in particular, results in the breakdown of traditional care-giving arrangements.

In 2011, at least 289,297 Indians moved to Saudi Arabia seeking employment.
