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An expat-less Saudi Arabia? Think again



Whenever faced with an issue, even a mistake, what do we do? We cry conspiracy! Victimization! Then we turn left and right in search of a scapegoat and that is where we hang the blame. In the case of Saudi unemployment, the scapegoat has been (drum rolling)...of course “guest workers” —whether they are illegally here or, legally here but illegally working. The solution: detain them and/or deport them. Then Saudi unemployment will be resolved and all will be happily ever working again.

Whom are we kidding? We can't be serious, though the situation utterly is, can we?

Imagining an expat-free country

Can we —and have we ever bothered to imagine our country without its guest workers? As it is wrong to assume that we have all been blessed with an imagination, perhaps all guest workers should indulge us and for 24 hours just totally stop working. Period. Why not experience an expat-less Saudi Arabia?

Let's take it from square one, shall we? So you wake up in the morning from your peaceful slumber, head for the morning shower to find not only is there no water in the bathroom, but also in addition there is a foul stench of sewage and a major plumbing problem. Why? The guest workers, who drive the water tankers, drive the sewage trucks or fix your plumbing, are gone.

Next, you and you alone must drive your wife to work, your children to school in good time and be at work on time. Why? The guest worker who drives your wife or drives the school bus is now taking the back seat. Then your car breaks down so you push it to the car repair shop only to find you've pushed in vain for it is deserted. Why? Not a guest worker in sight to do the greasy task of repairing your car.

You will have to take a taxi home or better ride the only public transport available, the bus. Alas another dead end. Again, why? No more guest workers behind the wheels of taxis or buses anymore.

You hyperventilate lapsing into a panic attack but manage to walk yourself to the nearest clinic. You walk into what seems to be a deserted lobby except for a few Saudis scurrying here and there to accommodate countless medical cases. Again, without the complement of guest workers the number of lab personnel, nurses and doctors has automatically dwindled.

The owner of the hotel where you are employed calls you up frantically screaming that the hotel rooms are unmade, room service is not delivering, the kitchen is abandoned —and topping it all, no newspapers have arrived that day! But of course there are no guest workers delivering the goods.

You receive a call from your wife telling you to pick up the children from school as there are no “guest working” teachers and to pick her up from the language center where she works, because their “guest working” language trainers have also left them high and dry. Shall we continue with the imagined “guest worker” 24-hour stoppage?

Passenger services would come to a stop. Do Saudis wheel luggage in our airports? Do they clean the planes or even the airports? Do they?

Many factories would shut down. Products may be “made in KSA” but are they actually made by Saudis?

Construction work would of course come to a full stop. Or is it Saudis you see working under the glaring sun, building our cities, our towers, schools, our hospitals, hotels, centers or our homes?

The streets would drown in garbage. Show me willing Saudis who will take on the job of collecting and dumping the trash of our so hygiene-conscious nation. Would it be accurate to say that a week almost of detaining expats in various sectors has given us a taste of where our country would be without our guest workers?

Scarce prospects

And the conclusion is...

Saudi unemployment is not due to or the fault of expatriates in the Kingdom. Saudi unemployment is due to ourselves.

There are countless jobs out there for Saudis earnestly seeking jobs. However, the number of Saudis with the skills, the work ethics and the willingness to work hard is scarce. Our education sector does not produce Saudis, or enough of them, to satisfy the rising needs of the job market, not in skills, not in discipline, not in attitude or with work ethics.

There are 140,000 students overseas studying via the King Abdullah scholarship program. Will they dutifully return enlightened as expected, ready to roll up their sleeves and justify their education? Will our homeland reap the benefits of their experiences and fulfill the aspirations for which they were initially sent?

For now most of those populating our education sector are mostly the product of this education system and continuously the by-product of our labor laws.

Our own public universities to date cannot fire faculty members —for any slack in educational performance or productivity.

Our labor laws do not protect employers' rights in terms of firing an employee for poor or non-performance, low or no productivity or lack of work ethics.

Yet, instead of looking in the mirror, questioning and examining ourselves, what do we do? We pinpoint guest workers as the cause of unemployment.

The homes we live in were built, and are mostly maintained well, thanks to the guest worker. The roads on which we drive and are driven, leading to centers, hospitals, companies, etc. were built by guest workers. Our first teachers, in higher and earlier education, were mostly guest workers. Our first doctors, nurses, electricians, plane captains...again guest workers.

In overdue justice we ought to be shaking the hands of guest workers in appreciation for their past and current contributions to our country.

Instead, there are those of us who have grabbed these hands and cuffed them. An expat-less Saudi Arabia? Think hard and think again!

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