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THE YOUNG SAUDI EMPLOYEE AND THE CURRENT LABOR MARKET DYNAMICS OF SAUDI ARABIA: A PARADIGM SHIFT

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ABSTRACT

Saudi Arabia is today in a transition stage as it is aiming to move away from the traditional oil-based economy to a diversified, knowledge-based economy. In this context, the responsibility of the private sector and educational institutions are becoming immensely important as they have the capabilities to train and develop young Saudi nationals to eventually build the nation. The recent downturn of the economy with the sudden fall in oil prices have resulted in an adverse situation in the country calling for austere reforms. There is a gradual, subtle shift in the Saudi youth mind-set post oil debacle and a prevailing volatile situation. Furthermore, the inherent perception of the private sector regarding Saudi youth's competencies and the latter's perception of private sector employment were also discussed in details. In relation to this, recent nationalization measures, its impact on economy, its shortcomings, futuristic approach and some of its key dimensions affecting the current perspective of the labour-market dynamics were evaluated.

KEYWORDS

education, labour, perception, private sector, quota, Saudi youth, unemployment.

INTRODUCTION

The Saudi Arabian economy has been one of the fastest expanding economies over the passage of time due to excess oil reserves and the government had implemented the far-reaching development programs and consequently the infrastructure with the support of expatriate employees to compensate the shortcomings of the local employees. Research shows that employing expatriate employees have drawn displeasure and some researchers had even discussed the detrimental effects on the local workers (Al-Dosary & Rahman, 2005; Mashood et al., 2009). The country has been referred to as a Rentier State, that is relies on external rent (Beblawi & Luciani, 1987) and (Ali & Abdelatif, 2013) with oil accounting for 90 percent of exports and 45.8 per cent of GDP (World Bank, 2014). It is a highly difficult job to come out from the rentier state phenomenon because this model has been endowing the economy with various advantages and posing constraints for stimulating income growth. Hence the unemployment situation of the country is a by-product of the rentier state economy, which is greatly structural and not an economic issue (Kabli, 2014).

With the coming years, the policy-makers realized the significance of employment of local workforce participation and problems of over-dependence on foreign workers. As a result, several government initiatives were launched from time to time over the years.

The policy-makers had well-realized at the early stages that the growth of the non-oil sectors would eventually foster development and economic prosperity of the kingdom. The result of it, for the past two decades, continuous thrust was given to education, training and development and healthcare, but still, there is a considerable inequity between demand and supply between the outputs of these measures and the requirements of the labor market. Unfortunately, this has resulted in structural unemployment among the Saudi citizens. Regarding the labor force and employment, the total labor force is forecasted to grow at an average annual rate of 3% increasing from about 7.74 million workers in 2004 to about 13.81 million in 2024 (Varshney, 2016).

In this research, I have given an exposition of the different labour market dimensions and the recent initiatives undertaken by the policy-makers, debating on the effectiveness of the initiatives and the shifting perceptual dynamics of the various players in the labour market. The Nationalization or the Saudization program have been upgraded from time to time, but unfortunately, it shows that unemployment problem has not been eradicated and failed to come out with satisfactory results and has also been aggravated by the increase of the Saudi labor force at an equal rate that equals the rate of employment of the nationals. Fakeeh (2009) had described the Saudization program as a policy with shortcomings and is a blind one. Infact, he has rightly said that Saudization as a policy focuses on the symptom (unemployment) rather than concentrating on the employability perspective.

PAST RESEARCH

The Saudi labour market is divided into public and private sectors as well as nationals and non-nationals or foreign worker. This categorisation has a profound impact on the differences in wage and non-wage advantages between the public and private sector. The local workforce and the expatriates have similar qualifications and experience, though their career paths are different. Sadi & Alburay (2009) had aptly stated that there is a constraint in firing a national which stimulates the tendency to hire foreign workers on well-defined contracts.

Now, I will elaborate on the previous research related to the perception of the Saudi youths and the private sector about jobs and employability. The country has a young population with over 40% of its population below the age of 20 and has been referred by experts as the youth bulge.

SAUDI YOUTH'S EMPLOYMENT RELATED PERCEPTION

In Saudi Arabia, certain occupations and designations have been disliked by the Saudis due to cultural and social barriers (Al-Dosary & Rahman, 2005). Early research reflects that the Saudi youths prefer employment in the public sector in comparison to the industry. The reasons cited are higher wages at the lower and middle-level positions, more stability in jobs, better-working conditions in the public sector, the esteem factor associated with government jobs and more scope for advancement (Al-Ajaji, 1995).

The above notion has been aptly highlighted by the host of a popular weekly television program telecast in the country. Based on his interaction with many Saudi youths, the program host Mohsin Shaikh Al- Hassan of the popular television program, "Jobs on Air", which has helped the Saudi young males and females find around 8,500 jobs, had rightly presented some major reasons for the young Saudis refusing blue-collar jobs. Al-Hassan had described that one reason why young Saudis refuse to accept menial jobs is that of the family. He further clarified, "Saudi families did not train their children while small to do chores at home. They provided everything the child needed. That's why children don't want to accept menial jobs when they grow up". This fear is also associated with the bleak chances of matrimony in case the individual is doing menial jobs. He had also added that in the Saudi heritage, young Saudi males preferred to work in the government instead of the private sector and many young Saudis believe that work in the private sector is not stable. He had further stated, "That's why many young Saudis transfer from one company to another" (Estimo Jr, 2015, Arab News).

As mentioned by Jawhar (2014), a positive sign is observed from a recent survey, it was found that 33 percent of Saudis preferred a government job still, while 29 percent wanted a position in the oil, gas and the petroleum sector, 26 percent preferred banking and finance. According to Jawhar (2014), if this survey were conducted a decade ago, the gap between demanding a government job over a private sector job would be much wider.

There have been welcoming gestures from Saudi industrial heads in recent times beckoning the young Saudi nationals to build up the nation. The chairman of the industrial committee of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and industry, Ibrahim Batterjee had described the acute need of Saudis in the industry and commercial sectors:

"Saudis have to have a sense of belonging in the workplace and feel that they are important for the improvement and development of the company they work for. Our youth should not view themselves as merely fulfilling Saudization requirements. They have to prove themselves," he stressed while suggesting regular meetings between people in business and Saudi young people to discuss the obstacles young job seekers face. (Al Misbahi, 2016).

THE IMPACT OF OIL PRICES AND THE SAUDI YOUTH

Over the past few months, there have been more footfalls of Saudi youths in the various job fairs held within few weeks in the capital and other cities. Insecurity about the future is evident regarding the falling prices and cascading career prospects. The generous benefits (in the form of free medical, education, energy subsidies and government jobs) that were once lavished on the citizens are found to be dwindling now. The shifting change is already vibrating in the economy today, for instance, government projects being delayed, spending limits being imposed on ministries and proposed measures to implement taxes and sell shares of Saudi Aramco (one of the most valued oil companies of the Kingdom). The golden oil boom over the years had resulted in a poorly structured economy with 90% of the government revenues were from oil, 70 % of the Saudi employees were employed by the government, and even the private sector depended heavily on the government spending (Hubbard, 2016). The progress and development did not create an enriched, intellectual, professional class nor did it infuse a culture of hard work. Most of the country's engineers and health care workers are foreigners, and many government employees vacate their offices mid-afternoon, or earlier.

Now the young Nationals face a bleak future for the first time. Today it is indeed hard to get the public sector jobs as the government have been curtailing costs and pushing the Saudis towards the private sector. A deep source of concern also emerges as each year at least 250,000 young Saudis enter the job market.

I have taken a suitable example cited by Hubbard (2016) in his enlightening article which I believe will highlight the sense of helplessness and dilemma among the Saudi youth today.

-A Saudi lady had recently earned a Ph.D. in a medicine-related field in the USA. Her father had been in a good position in the military, and when her mother finished her degree in Arabic, she had immediately got a job near her house and a lump sum cash bonus for just graduating. Today the daughter has struggled to find work with her much higher academic credentials and her husband, also educated in the USA is still unemployed. She had regretfully said:

"My parents had great opportunities..... They provided well, and we had a comfortable life, so I always thought it would be the same for us".

PRIVATE SECTOR PERCEPTION

Initially, Saudi employees have not been the most preferred choice by the organizations because the latter were skeptical about the match between the qualifications and the work requirements in the market (Achoui, 2009). Aldosary (2006) further reasoned that there was a scarcity of competent Saudi workers, dislike for long hours, and more faith in the job stability and security in the public sector.

Shah (2006), examined the problems associated with employing the local workforce, the visa buying and selling market for local sponsors, the disinterest of the locals to do foreigners' jobs. Here the author had pointed out about small attitudinal changes were being observed. Additionally, the Saudis considered public sector jobs as their inherent right as a citizen. Also, Al-Hassan (1988) explained that companies preferred expatriates over Saudi employees because they considered expatriates to be more educated, less costly and having practical and professional courses unlike the academic subjects did by the Saudi students.

QUOTA SYSTEM (NITAQAT)

Nitaqat was a strategic tool to phase out the previous Saudization program. This program requires that the private sector companies achieve particular quotas for employing Saudi workers (Fakeih, 2012). The main thrust is to create Saudi employment by deporting or minimizing most of the foreign workers despite the fact that Saudis do not desire to work for such jobs. There are however changes that are reflected in Saudis accepting low profile jobs now such as cashiers, waiters, and transport staff, etc.

In the course of 2011, the Saudi government started putting into action the Nitaqat or the quota system that implies specific employment targets. However, there has been much debate about this job quota system. Al Gosaibi (2008) emphasized that this should be implemented at the cost of the productivity of the nation's economy and there should be a simultaneous system of enriched education, training, and development to meet the demands of the labor market. The policy-makers have the objective to create 3.5 million jobs for Saudi nationals by 2025 with the help of Nitaqat and two other initiatives, namely the Hafiz and Labour Market Observatory. The Nitaqat (Quota) system is being administered alongside Hafiz, which is another initiative of the Ministry of Labour. Hafiz is an unemployment benefit which grants a certain monthly allowance to the unemployed Saudi young men and women. It also assists the Saudi jobseekers to find jobs and imparts training programs. Besides, the government has launched the Liqaat programs, and job fairs are under its fold whereby there are interviews arranged between the employers and the job seekers.

The initial response has been positive as the demand for local workers had shot up and also had a positive impact on the wages for Saudi nationals. The Nitaqat (Quota) system has been in recent time's streamlined processes both for the Saudi nationals to a large extent and the expatriates to a certain extent despite the bottlenecks.

The recent analysis of the performance of Nitaqat's effect on increasing the Saudi national's employment in the private sector is disturbing (Hertog, 2014) as it demonstrated that there had been a medium increase in the national workforce employment rate. Even the process of putting the Nitaqat into action has been an uphill task, and till date, the program had an average performance (IMF country report, 2013).

The system had ushered in considerable high cost and barriers that hamper the competitive, market-driven principles of development. A quota system like this calls for continuous and consistent controlling acumen that is an extremely complex and challenging task. Ironically, they breed false employment, exploitation, manipulation and corrupt practices.

EDUCATION AND UNEMPLOYMENT

A scrutiny of the education sector reveals that the Saudi government had been invested exorbitant amounts for the construction of schools, universities, and technical colleges. The total expenditure on the education sector has increased over the years: in 2004, it was around 18 billion USD which soared to around 56 billion USD in 2014 (Kabli, 2014). However, such investments reflect a strategic thrust that will reap in results in the long-term and will not have much impact on alleviating the present unemployment problem. This immediate problem has been further elaborated by Baqadir, Patrick, and Burns (2011), in their research. They had drawn attention to the existing skill gap between the Saudis and the non-Saudis, particularly in the area of vocational training. In a way, the professional education had failed, and the gap prevailed around work ethics, specialized knowledge, and generic skills.

There have been some bodies and agencies established additionally to support the nationalization programs. The Centennial Fund was established in 2004 with Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority (SAGIA) to promote job creation through the SMEs. Also, the Human Resources Development Fund (HRDF) was set up in 1999 to subsidize salaries of trainees and fresh graduates on the completion of their training programs. The HRDF supplies the private sector with 50 percent and 75 percent of the salary and training costs of Saudis for two years (Sadi & Al- Buraey, 2009).

A recent survey was conducted in collaboration with Injaz Al-Arab, Bayt.com (Job website) and YouGov (market researcher). It was a part of the Al-Arab "Expand Your Horizon" initiative and had tried to tackle the high percentage of youth unemployment in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region as per Saudi Gazette (2016, February 2).

The salient findings of the survey have been presented below:

- Many young people had never considered alternative sectors such as hospitality, aviation, and media as career options.
- In choosing careers, the Arab youth suffer due to lack of knowledge and information about the breadth of opportunities. (2/3rd of respondents shared this feedback).

- A deep need for counseling and awareness campaign about the various lucrative, non-traditional career choices needs to be implemented at a systematic level.
- 80% of fresh graduates claim that college did not help them identify or apply for suitable job opportunities
- The majority of the respondents still believed that traditional sectors (construction, gas/energy, petroleum) provide the best employment prospects.

CURRENT INITIATIVES

Recent initiatives have been aggressive in curbing unemployment. A commission for Job Generation and Anti-Unemployment has been recently established to address the decline in oil prices as well as the youth unemployment rate. This has been considered as a welcome initiative as the country has the responsibility to place 1.9 million Saudi youths in the next ten years. This backdrop has given fundamental challenges to the decision-makers to create a knowledge economy and increase employment opportunities.

REVAMPING THE SAUDIZATION OR LOCALIZATION PROGRAM

A new Saudization program referred to as "Guided Localization" has been launched recently under the Labor Minister, Mufrej Al-Haqbani's direct supervision. The main aim of the program is to overcome the challenges in achieving Saudization and achieving total or partial Saudization in some sectors, especially the retail sector. There are four stages of this program. The first stage involves sectoral planning under which the ministry will work in close coordination with the targeted sectors and impart training with the focus to replace foreign workers with Saudis in skilled and semi-skilled jobs in the industry.

The second phase is the regional intervention, which focuses on building up the work with the provincial governorates to support Saudization program for each province. The third stage is the total Saudization of some trades in association with other ministries and would begin with Saudization of the sale and maintenance sector of mobile phones. The fourth or the final one is linking the Balanced Nitaqat Program (to be launched by the Ministry shortly) with the Guided Localization Program (Saudi Gazette, March 2016)

INITIATIVES IN COORDINATION WITH HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT FUND (HRDF) AND OTHER ASSOCIATIONS

There have been jobs fair organized by the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce (JCCI) and other organizations like the HRDF specified (Khan, 2015).

The Ministries of Health and Education in collaboration with the different universities launched a program to help the Saudi youth to find jobs. A memorandum of understanding was signed in Riyadh between Labor Minister Mufarej bin Saad Al-Haqabani and Education Minister Dr. Azzam Al-Dakhil in the presence of chancellors from 28 universities, Technical and Vocational Training Corp. (TVTC) Gov. Ali Al-Ghafis and Human Resources Development Fund (HRDF) Director General Ibrahim Al-Mouaikel. This program has been rolled off after an extended agreement, whereby the key figures would develop an elaborate scheme to provide education as well as vocational guidance to the Saudi students to enable them to have better person-job fit in organizations. The program would connect the contents and output of education curriculum to help the students with the training needs to suit the private sector enterprises with enhanced skills to fit into various cadres of employment.

In a similar note, Al-Dakhil had an agreement with the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency (SAMA) under which 5,000 Saudi students will be granted scholarship and jobs in the insurance and financial sectors. The program was a new scheme in which the ministry will grant scholarships to Saudi students based on market needs and then employ them when they return home after completing their courses (Rasooldeen, 2015).

A paradigm change is needed. However one has to remember that the Saudis are not habitual to the radical changes because in the past there have been incremental changes done.

A Saudi executive in the construction industry had remarked that moving too fast would jeopardize the business and the economy in the long run: "It has to be done and I am with it, but you can't change decades' worth of problems in a few years". (Hubbard, 2016).

DISCUSSION & SUGGESTIONS

The results of the Nationalisation policies have been not much impressive, and this may be because the program could not handle the deeper issues effectively. The central paradox lies in two distinct areas: the creation of pressure on the private sector to recruit Saudis with proper understanding the mindset of the Saudi nationals and providing proper encouragement. The widening wage gap is another area which still makes public sector jobs a major attraction for the youths (Alsheikh & Erbus, 2013). Moreover, there seems to be a disconnect between the policies and the strategic objectives of the government. A meticulous administrative framework can only make Nitaqat (Quota) system a viable model in the labour market. Only superficially modifying the number of Saudi and non-Saudi workers does not eradicate the deeper malaise. Another contradiction lies in the wage revision domain, the introduction of the minimum wage to compensate the perceived low wage cannot be a long-term solution to the problem. Hay Group (2012) had found that nationals are paid 13 percent more than average market wages, and there has been pressure on the private sector to conform to this requirement.

As a result of the wage gap between the national and non-national labour, some organizations had started practicing fake Saudization- that is hiring unskilled and unqualified Saudi nationals to fill up the quotas artificially but not giving them real work to do. This is a dark side of the Nationalization policy's effects and may have far-reaching negative results in future. The topic of the contemporary Nationalization programs has been argued by Alhamad (2014) as the way to increase the wages, but at the same time, there is the growing risk of contracting foreign workforce leading to lower productivity and work quality. Hertog (2012), have presented the real, dark side of the quota system and prohibitions. Companies in desperation to avoid rules have started practicing illegal activities instead of actual national employment. The labour market segmentation has resulted in unachievable large-scale job creation. This is also increased by the big wage differentials between citizens and non-nationals, the frequent national labour movement and their defined rights of the national labour which make them less viable for employment. The significant influence of prices rather than administrative involvement in charting out labour market strategy can coordinate the disconnected public-private sectors, enhance expatriate labour prices as well as the private, national workforce.

Saudi Arabia has been spending enormous amounts on education, especially higher education in recent years. Some of the Saudi institutions are developing into research universities.

Altbach (2014) had discussed in details the essential structural and organizational problems related to the Saudi academic context. The highly structured, inflexible Civil Service arrangements which govern the academic appointments. This grants every Saudi citizen appointed immediate tenure. Salary increases are usually linked to the length of service, not by ranking the performance, so the meritorious employees are not rewarded for their productivity. The issue of foreign academics (constituting 42% of the total workforce in Saudi Arabian public universities) is a vital facilitating factor too. These faculty members are appointed on renewable term contracts and not given tenured posts or even long-term contracts, despite contributing a lot to quality research and development. Many of them spend more than half of their lives in the kingdom, and the incentives are high for them to renew their contracts. Unfortunately, there is little or no incentive to develop their loyalty for the Saudi University/ Institution or to be involved as an employee in the top decision-making levels. Like universities in other countries, Saudi Arabia can dissociate from the Civil Service system to a considerable extent – give more independence to the Universities in recruitments, evaluation of the academic staff and related academic – administrative decisions. The academic profession in Saudi Arabia has a real potential for excelling in research, development and preparing students for a better future provided the bureaucratic and administrative structures be removed/ reduced.

Ali Al-Zaied, Director of Human resources in Takamul Economical Solution Company, had emphasized on the lack of relevant training to train and develop them for the industrial sector. There is a dire need for colleges and universities to work on revising and developing suitable curriculum and blend it with practical workshops shortly. Economists and political analysts have reiterated on the immediate measures to absorb the young Saudi population into the workforce, besides around 185,000 students have been studying abroad and has been corroborated by Alzu'be (2012) who had stressed the need to reform curriculums and teaching methods and investing in student training.

There is also the affirmative response of the Saudi youth in recent times in the research of National Centre of Youth Research at King Saud University that found 90 percent of the youth (male and female) work with devotion and enthusiasm. The sample size was 6156, which is indeed a large one. Al-Jasser said that the study revealed that 54.4 percent of Saudi youths, male and female, actively and eagerly approach their jobs, while 2.6 percent of youths are different. Of these youths, 35.8 percent work longer hours without getting bored. Most of the male and female youths have a sense of seriousness and responsibility toward their work and want to perform better (Arab News, 2016).

This finding along with other areas of Saudi youth's feedback regarding the employment, jobs and the turbulent times indicate that the Saudi youth is metamorphosing with a deep sense of maturity, insight, and responsibility to oneself and the nation.

It is still very evident that Saudi Arabia will continue to rely on foreign labor. What makes it worse is the refusal of Saudi citizens to take on occupations that every modern economy requires which include unskilled menial positions. Recent surveys show that much unemployed Saudi youths are frustrated because they are being offered menial jobs done by expatriates which they feel limit their social mobility. Omar Al-Ubaydli, program director at the Derasat economic and political research center, told Al-Arabiya News that any Gulf Arab country, not just Saudi Arabia, should change the attitudes regarding what some consider unsociable jobs (Naar, 2015). The government should now concentrate on providing the right incentives for people to go into the private sector. Nevertheless, the kingdom's survival in the long-term is subject to its capacity to break away from the shackles of oil-reliance and develop a diversified knowledge-based economy. We witness in recent times that the policy-makers are concentrating the movement towards a knowledge-based economy, especially in the Ninth development plan. The key aspects of the Tenth Development Plan also reveal two major thrusts: diversification from the oil economy and the creation of jobs for the Saudi citizens. Although Saudi Arabia presents a highly closed and conservative context, it is a rapidly developing nation (Varshney, 2016).

Finally, Economists also assert that the development of SMEs can offer hope for the unemployed. They urge continued facilitation of SMEs' access to finance and other forms of support to further the development of this sector. Among the current initiatives that need extra support and more efficient implementation are the Kafala Program (initiated in 2006), which provides SMEs with access to credit (credit guarantees); the Saudi Credit and Saving Bank, which extends loans to SMEs; the establishment of specialized SME units within banks; and the setting up of SIMAH, the Saudi Credit Bureau (Fatany, 2016).

The thrust should be to develop the Saudis for high-skilled jobs. In doing so the organizations have to oversee professional collaborations between Saudis and the expatriates in the organizations. Hence instead of radically removing expatriate employees from the system, sufficient time should be devoted to take their professional support to hone the Saudi employees' skills and then phase them off with a good note (Varshney, 2016).

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