



Analysis: Saudi Shi'ite protests show rise of more radical generation

By Angus McDowall

LONDON (Reuters) - Renewed unrest among minority Shi'ite Muslims in Saudi Arabia have exposed a rift between their traditional leaders and a younger, more radical generation exasperated by what they see as persistent discrimination in the mainly Sunni Muslim kingdom.

Three young men were shot dead by security forces in exchanges of fire in the country's east this month sparked by the arrest of a radical cleric on July 8, raising the death toll from such incidents since November to nine.

"The youth, the young people, want a change. They want something different. They are telling the old generation (of Shi'ite leaders): 'Stay away. You've tried for 30 years and have achieved nothing,'" an activist from the flashpoint village of Awamiya said in a phone interview, who asked not to be named.

Shi'ites have long accused the government of systematic bias by denying them important state jobs, restricting their places of worship and limiting their educational opportunities, charges Riyadh denies.

The government has pointed to efforts to include Shi'ites in a "national dialogue" started by King Abdullah last decade, the appointment of Shi'ites to the advisory Shoura Council and a relaxation of policy to allow them more freedom to worship.

It views the protests in the context of tensions with Shi'ite power and regional rival Iran, which it accuses of fomenting the unrest, and says it has only used force when its security forces have been physically attacked.

An Interior Ministry spokesman did not respond to repeated calls and an email and a text message requesting comment.

"The Iranians are not hiding their sympathies. When relations with Iran improve and tensions decrease, the Shia will feel more relaxed and the government will feel more confident in allowing reform," said prominent Saudi commentator Jamal Khashoggi.

Saudi Shi'ites, who mostly live in the oil-rich Eastern Province, have for decades followed a group of leaders who directed anti-government protests in 1979 before striking a deal in 1993 to quit active opposition in return for gradual reforms.

However, as a younger generation of activists has come of age at a time when Arab Spring uprisings have toppled autocrats in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Libya, they have increasingly questioned the ability of their leaders to deliver real change.

While online calls to protest were almost entirely ignored by Sunni Saudis in the spring of 2011, hundreds of Shi'ites did hit the streets for rallies, encouraged by radical leaders like Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, whose arrest prompted this month's unrest.

In October, when 11 members of the Saudi security forces were injured in a protest outside a police station, Shi'ite leaders visited the families of men it thought might be involved to appeal for calm - but were rebuffed.

"We said: 'Enough. We don't want the situation to deteriorate towards violence. There will be blood and killings. Stop.' But nobody listened. They said to the leaders: 'You stop. You haven't delivered what you have promised. Now we will do our best,'" said Tawfiq al-Saif, a prominent community leader.

In a further sign of a rupture in the once tight-knit Shi'ite community, a letter from top clerics calling for calm collected only 25 signatures, compared to dozens after previous bouts of protest, Saif said, whereas a letter demanding faster change was signed by 37 clergymen.

Nimr, who was shot in the leg during his arrest, had for several years preached an uncompromising message of demanding more rights for the minority and built a following in the Qatif district, one of Saudi Arabia's main Shi'ite centers.

Films uploaded to YouTube on consecutive days earlier this month showed night protests in Qatif and Awamiya as crowds marched with placards in support of Nimr and chanted "down with the House of Saud", the kingdom's long-ruling family.

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From Riyadh, capital of a kingdom that follows the strict Wahhabi Sunni doctrine in which Shi'ism is viewed as heresy, the protests are viewed in the context of regional frictions.

Locked in a bitter geo-political rivalry with Iran involving sectarian struggles in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and neighboring Bahrain, Riyadh regards the heightened tensions in Qatif as evidence of foreign interference.

When protests engulfed a police station in October, the Interior Ministry blamed "a foreign country which tried to undermine the security of the homeland in a blatant act of interference". Officials have confirmed this meant Iran.

Saudi Arabia has also accused Tehran of whipping up disturbances in Bahrain, a Gulf island nation that adjoins the Eastern Province and where majority Shi'ites have rebelled against a Sunni monarchy closely aligned with Riyadh.

Iran denies these charges. But in a sign of links between the Shi'ite communities of both Arab countries, demonstrators in Qatif were this month pictured in films posted online carrying Bahraini flags. Reuters was not able to verify the footage.

Mustafa Alani, an analyst with close ties to Saudi Arabia's security establishment, said the continuing violence in Syria, where Gulf Arab states have supported a rebellion against a government allied to Iran, has only intensified those concerns.

"There is an assumption that there is a strong link between what happens in Syria and what happens in Bahrain and the Eastern Province because Iran is worried it will lose its major ally," he said. "The general view is this (unrest) is not an isolated thing. There is planning behind it."

Saudi Shi'ites, however, say the accusations of collusion with a foreign power are unfair and often appear based on the fact that Iran's Arabic-language al-Alam television channel, which has repeatedly called for protests, is widely watched.

"I think what happens is that the Iranians have made use of the protests to support their argument against Saudi Arabia. But to say that the Iranians were behind these protests is exaggerated," said Saif, who was one of the Shi'ite leaders who negotiated the 1993 agreement.

RESTRAINT

"Every morning when I wake up and go outside, I can see tires still burning, garbage still burning from the dead of night. Every time there is shooting in Awamiya, I can hear it," said the activist who did not want to be named.

While Shi'ite leaders appealed for calm, the authorities have also tried to prevent the violence from escalating, according to both Saif and Alani.

Saif said the security forces had allowed peaceful marches for funerals of the men killed this month and had only responded with gunfire when attacked by people in the crowd.

However, the activist in Awamiya described the area as "like a military base with checkpoints everywhere" and said Shi'ites would not stop protesting unless the government pulled back.

Shi'ites accuse the government of approaching their demands only through the lens of security, rather than looking seriously at political reforms to improve their situation.

"Are the authorities waiting for hundreds of thousands of people to come out onto the streets? It's better to apply some reforms and convince people there is still some hope," said Saif.

(Editing by [Mark Heinrich](#))

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