



Qatar: A Model of Social Change?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Gulf region's onerous *kafala* or labor sponsorship system has been denounced as a form of modern slavery. Potential Qatari moves to become the first Gulf state to effectively abolish *kafala* could produce a rare World Cup that leaves a true legacy of social and economic change.

In a rare kudo, Qatar's fiercest labor critic, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), recently [hailed a Qatari announcement](#) that it was introducing far-reaching reforms as a "breakthrough."

The ITUC and human rights groups have campaigned for labor reform and the abolition of *kafala* ever since world soccer body FIFA awarded Qatar hosting rights for the 2022 World Cup in December 2010. Despite activists' frustration at the slow pace of change in Qatar since then, Qatar's response to the criticism has created a legacy of change even before the event has been held.

Qatar is now the first autocratic Gulf state to engage with its critics rather than refuse to talk to them and bar them from the country – the standard practice in most Gulf countries. It also acknowledged early on that the *kafala* system, which puts migrant workers at the mercy of their employers, needs to change.

The ITUC was quick to claim credit for a recent Qatari announcement promising far-reaching reforms. Those reforms, which have yet to be enshrined into law, would prevent employers from unilaterally changing labor contracts, abolish exit visas, introduce a minimum wage, and prevent employers from controlling workers' documents.

The ITUC and human rights groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch were crucial in pushing Qatar towards these reforms, which would put it in the lead of labor change in the Gulf.

The timing of the promised reforms was likely determined by Qatar's need to fend off being penalized by the International Labor Organization (ILO) as well as the almost five-month-old Gulf crisis, which pits the Gulf state against an alliance led by the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

The ILO had threatened to slap Qatar with one its harshest penalties if the Gulf state failed to credibly address criticism of its labor regime by the time the group meets in November. The announced reforms kill two birds with one stone. They will no doubt go some length towards satisfying the ILO, but they will also allow Qatar to project itself as a good international citizen at a time when the UAE-Saudi alliance has imposed a diplomatic and economic boycott in a bid to force it to adhere to their policies rather than chart an independent course.

In their first joint action since the feud erupted among the Gulf states, Qatar recently joined Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as well as the US in [imposing sanctions](#) on several individuals and entities accused of supporting the Islamic State and al-Qaida in Yemen. By joining, Qatar ensured that it remained on the right side of US President Donald J. Trump and countered Gulf allegations that it supports militancy and political violence.

If implemented, the labor reforms would also weaken a covert UAE-Saudi campaign to persuade FIFA to deprive Qatar of its World Cup hosting rights. Qatar's detractors have used the labor issue in a "pot calls the kettle black" campaign against the World Cup being held in the Gulf state. Dubai's idiosyncratic police chief, [Lt. Gen. Dhahi Khalfan](#), went as far as saying that the UAE and Saudi Arabia would lift their boycott if Qatar surrendered its hosting rights – a demand that was rejected by Qatar out of hand.

The labor reforms would also serve to deflect allegations of wrongdoing in the Qatari bid for the World Cup. Nasser Al-Khelaifi, the head of Paris St. Germain and CEO of beIN Media Group, the Al Jazeera television network's sports franchise, became the first Qatari official to be investigated for bribery of a FIFA official in Qatar's bid for World Cup hosting rights. Al-Khelaifi was recently grilled by Swiss investigators for seven hours. He has denied any wrongdoing.

Claiming Qatar's announced reforms as a trade union victory, ITUC general secretary Sharon Burrow said, "the new guidance from Qatar signals the start of real reforms in Qatar which will bring to an end the use of modern slavery and

puts the country on the pathway to meeting its international legal obligations on workers' rights. Following discussions in Doha there is a clear government commitment to normalize industrial protections for migrant workers."

In contrast to the ITUC, which was unequivocal in its praise of Qatar, human rights groups like Amnesty International extended a more cautious welcome to Qatar's planned reforms.

[An Amnesty International spokesperson](#) suggested it is too soon to judge. "We are not able to assess the significance of these developments until we have seen the full details of the government's commitments. However, today's announcements have clear potential to have a positive impact on migrant workers' lives, depending on how they're implemented," the spokesperson said.

Former Human Rights Watch Gulf expert Nicholas McGeehan noted that Qatar's road towards labor reform has been littered with promises that were either only partially kept or not fulfilled at all. "All we have today are promises, and promises have been broken before. I feel we need to put expressions of optimism on hold until we see full details, changes in the law where necessary, and a time frame for promised reforms to be implemented," Mr. McGeehan said.

Against the backdrop of the Gulf crisis, Qatar has a vested interest in making good on its promises. Labor reform would project the state, despite its being an autocracy, as a 21st century nation that embraces some degree of change not only for others in the greater Middle East, but also for itself. It potentially would position the 2022 World Cup as a rare mega-sporting event to have served as a catalyst of change. That is a legacy that international sporting associations aspire to through major tournaments but seldom achieve.

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