



COMMENTARY

No.301

Friday, 21 August 2015

Qatari Promises of Labour Reform Ring Hollow amid Revived Corruption Allegations

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A promise by Qatari labour and social affairs minister Abdullah Saleh Mubarak al-Khulaifi to reform the Gulf state's controversial kafala or labour sponsorship system by the end of this year is likely to cut little ice with human rights and trade union activists who four years after Qatar won the right to host the 2022 World Cup are demanding deeds rather than words.

Al-Khulaifi's promise comes amid an avalanche of media disclosures that suggest massive violation of world soccer body FIFA's bidding rules, involving substantial payments to soccer officials across the globe, vote swapping, and shady political deals between FIFA president Sepp Blatter and the Qatari leadership. The revelations coupled with a crackdown on critics of Qatar's labour system further call into question the Gulf state's sincerity.

German television disclosed that several of its reporters were detained in Qatar while filming a documentary on the conditions of migrant workers, who constitute a majority of the population. The documentary reportedly also contains new evidence of corruption in the Qatari bid as well as Russia's successful effort to host the 2018 World Cup. The German crew's equipment was returned only after all data had been deleted.

The various revelations about the Qatari bid also contradict long-standing denials of any wrongdoing by Qatar, including assertions that disgraced former FIFA vice president and Asian Football Confederation (AFC) president Mohammed Bin Hammam was not intimately involved in the Qatari bid. Bin Hammam was banned for life from involvement in professional soccer in late 2012 by FIFA.

His downfall is still reverberating in FIFA and the AFC with disclosures in a book by two Sunday Times reporters of his backroom deal making that allegedly played a key role in ensuring the success of the Qatari bid and recent allegations that a senior AFC official sought to undermine an independent audit of Bin Hammam's financial management of the AFC.

Outgoing FIFA executive committee member Theo Zwanziger warned in December that some of the group's members associations, frustrated with Qatar's failure to act on its promises, including the creation of an independent commission to monitor progress on labour reform incorporated in a government endorsed study by law firm DLA Piper, may demand that Qatar be stripped of its hosting rights at this month's FIFA congress.

The German television revelations about Russia expected to be aired coincide with a bipartisan letter signed by Democratic and Republican senators in the United States calling on Blatter to strip Russia of its hosting rights given that Western nations have imposed sanctions on it because of Russian involvement in the conflict in Ukraine.

Calls for penalizing Russia or Qatar are likely to go unheeded by FIFA which has brushed aside the recent allegations. Blatter did however warn Qatari emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani in March that his country needed to do more to improve workers' lives. The sincerity of Blatter's words are called into question by The Sunday Times book based on millions of documents that portray the FIFA president as duplicitous and Machiavellian in his dealings with the Gulf state.

To be fair, what emerges from the disclosures goes far beyond the question whether Qatar did or did not violate FIFA's bid rules. In fact, depriving Qatar of the World Cup would amount to scapegoating without a radical reform of the governance of world soccer.

The problem the revelations really lay bare is a system of governance that is totally corrupt and non-transparent and in which men like Blatter and AFC president Sheikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa see themselves as above the law and are oblivious to any globally accepted standards of good governance.

Much of what Qatar allegedly did to secure the World Cup is standard practice within FIFA that like the AFC applies standards of good governance only when it is politically convenient and serves the interests of the sport's supremoes. Ultimately, that is what felled Bin Hammam.

Nonetheless, four years of persistent questioning of the integrity of Qatar's bid coupled with widespread criticism of the working and living conditions of migrant workers as well as the Gulf state's human rights record that although questionable compares favourably to that of other countries in the region has undermined one of the main goals of Qatar's massive investment in sports: the building of soft power in a world in which cultural and public policy is as important as traditional diplomacy and hard power.

Qatar may feel less sensitive about soft power at a time that it has stepped up arms purchases with this week's US\$ 7 billion acquisition of 24 French Rafale fighter jets, deepened security cooperation with other Gulf states, and has become more actively engaged in the Middle East's multiple conflicts, including Yemen and Syria.

The sharpening of the region's fault lines also complicates labour reform in a country where Qatari nationals constitute a mere 12 percent of the population and any change in the status of non-Qataris is perceived as an existential threat that endangers Qataris' grip on their society and culture.

Hassan Al-Thawadi, the secretary general for Qatar's 2022 Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, suggested that labour conditions had already improved by noting that no workers engaged in the construction of stadia for the World Cup had died this year. Human rights and trade union activists have documented the deaths of a large number of workers on construction sites in recent years, primarily on non-World Cup construction sites. Al-Thawadi put the number of workers on World Cup projects at 2,500, a negligible fraction of the total number of unskilled and semi-skilled workers in the Gulf state.

The plight of workers in Qatar could be put on public display with a preliminary investigation by French prosecutor Catherine Denis into allegations that French company Vinci Construction and its Qatari subsidiary, QDVC, had used "forced labour, servitude and concealment" in World Cup-relation construction. Vinci has denied any wrongdoing.

The interplay of regional and domestic politics puts the Qatari leadership in a bind. The country's credibility rides on swift implementation of promises to improve the condition of migrant workers in a bid to weaken demands by human rights and trade union activists to abolish the kafala system that puts employees at the mercy of their employers. Yet, perceived regional threats harden popular Qatari resistance to any change that could fundamentally alter the nature of Qatari society.

Greater conservatism is reflected in measures designed to enhance adherence to Islamic law. Rules banning the consumption of alcohol during Ramadan have been strengthened with a ban on the serving of alcohol in hotels in the days running up to Eid al Adha, the feast honouring Abraham's biblical willingness to sacrifice his son, and during the first half of the holiday. The ban follows the forbidding in 2011 of the serving of alcohol on Pearl Island, a popular expatriate destination, and in 2013 in public areas in hotels except for bars and restaurants.

Note: This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced with the author's permission. Web link: <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2015/05/qatari-promises-of-labour-reform-ring.html>

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