

COMMENTARY

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Religious Support for Qatari Labour Reforms puts Gulf States on the Spot

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A panel in Doha of religious scholars, officials of Qatar's government-sponsored human rights committee, and international labour activists has called on Qatar to radically alter its controversial labour policies. The call serves to support Qatari government promises of labour reform in response to World Cup-related international criticism and increases moral pressures on Gulf states to significantly improve the plight of their millions of migrant workers.

By justifying the call on theological grounds and drawing on a parable of Omar Ibn al-Khattab, one of the 7th century's first four successors of the Prophet Mohammed, widely viewed by even the most conservative or militant Muslims as the righteous caliphs, Sheikh Ali Al Qaradaghi made it more difficult for Qatar and other Gulf states to justify evading radical labour reforms.

That is true despite the fact that Qaradaghi serves as secretary general of the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS), a group headed by Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, one of the most popular religious leaders in the Muslim world. The IUMS is widely viewed as close to the Muslim Brotherhood and has been proscribed as a terrorist organization by the United Arab Emirates, which takes a tough stance against any expression of political Islam.

Egypt, which like the UAE has banned the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization and has since brutally cracked down on the group by killing many of its members and imprisoning many more, sentenced Mr. Qaradawi in absentia and other Brotherhood leaders to death in June.

In a separate case, Egyptian prosecutors earlier this month referred Qaradawi, an Egyptian-born Qatari national with close ties to the Brotherhood who resides in Doha, to a military court on

charges of murder. Egypt recently rejected an offer by Qatar, which supports the Brotherhood, to mediate with the Islamist group.

The panellists' call came days after Qatar's cabinet declared its support for draft legislation that, according to a government statement, would regulate the entry, exit and residency of foreigners.

Qatar has been under severe pressure since it won almost five years ago the right to host the 2022 World Cup to reform, if not abolish, its controversial kafala or sponsorship system that puts workers at the mercy of their employers.

Migrant workers' labour and housing conditions in the Gulf have long been condemned by governments, international NGOs and activists, some of whom have described the conditions as modern-day slavery. Opponents within world soccer body FIFA to Qatar's hosting of the World Cup have used the labour issue to argue in favour of withdrawing the tournament from the Gulf state.

Qatar Foundation together with the 2022 Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy of the World Cup has issued standards for migrant workers' labour and housing conditions that go a far way in meeting demands by international human rights and labour activists. The foundation has been funding efforts to create an Islamic legal base for labour reform.

Human rights groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have worked with Qatar in conceptualizing reforms but have been frustrated by the Gulf state's failure to move quickly on implementation. The Qatari pledges for reform have forced virtually all Gulf States to tinker with their labour regimes.

The UAE like Qatar has been in the firing line of activists over labour conditions at constructions sites for an Abu Dhabi campus of New York University and a Guggenheim and other world famous museums on the emirate's Saadiyat Island as well as in advance of Dubai's hosting of the 2020 World Cup. The UAE, in contrast to Qatar, has refused to engage with its critics, either jailing them or barring them entry to the country and has rejected all criticism.

Speaking at the Research Centre for Islamic Legislation and Ethics (CILE) of Hamad Bin Khalifa University's Qatar Faculty of Islamic Studies, Qaradaghi said: "We see (migrants) working for us ... But there is no appreciation. There is no love dedicated to those people. The earth was made for all creatures, all human beings, not one category of people... Arab and Muslim countries ought to take care of those who provide long periods of service and participate in the building of these countries. We need to take care of these people."

Qaradaghi called further for paying migrant workers, who account for a majority of the Qatari population, a living wage that was related to the cost of living in the Gulf. He said that a monthly

wage of “QR 1,000 (US\$ 275), for example, in this country cannot be good enough,” according to Doha News.

Qaradaghi recounted an encounter between Omar Ibn al-Khattab and an elderly Jew who was begging. In response to the caliph’s question why he was begging, the man said that despite working for half a century he was unable to make ends meet. The caliph instructed his aides to give the man money on the grounds that he had not been treated fairly. Qaradaghi said the caliph’s gesture should serve as an inspiration for Gulf rulers and employers.

Qaradaghi’s Islamic theme was picked up by Latife Reda, a consultant of the International Labour Organization (ILO), who argued that the rights of workers, including the right to decent living and working conditions, were basic to Islamic tradition.

Reda highlighted imbalances in Qatar’s agreements with labour supplying states, many of which are in Asia, that stipulate different wage levels for different nationalities. She also focused on the vulnerability of domestic workers who in Qatar and other Gulf states are not covered by local labour laws.

Migrant-Rights.org, an online advocacy group, cautiously praised Kuwait, which recently passed some of the Gulf’s first legislation governing the recruitment and employment of domestic labour but took the Gulf state to task for not adopting effective enforcement mechanisms.

Qaradaghi and Reda’s theme was echoed by Jabir Al Howaiel of Qatar’s government-appointed National Human Rights Committee. “Respect and dignity of humans should be part of our culture so every human can live with dignity and liberate himself from fear in an environment that is conducive to security and development. Workers ought not to lose their freedom for a piece of bread. They need to live with dignity,” Al Howaiel.

The calls by Qaradaghi and Al Howaiel as well as Reda serve the government to counter resistance to labour reform from Qatar’s citizenry who account for a mere 12 percent of the country’s population.

Many Qataris fear that granting any rights to foreigners’ risks opening a Pandora’s Box that ultimately could lead to them losing controls of their society and culture. Islamic justification for reform makes opposition not only in Qatar but also in other Gulf states morally more difficult to defend.

Note: This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web link: <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2015/09/religious-support-for-qatari-labour.html>

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