

COMMENTARY

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Qatar 2022 – A Mixed Blessing

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Winning the 2022 World Cup hosting rights has proven to be a mixed blessing for Qatar. The wealthy Gulf emirate, more than two years after world soccer body FIFA voted in Qatar's favour, is under greater scrutiny than it ever has been and that it originally had bargained for. Qatar's suitability as a host is being questioned, its labour system is under attack and some court decisions have earned it unfavourable publicity.

Writing in *Arabian Business* as FIFA prepares at an executive committee meeting in October to move the dates of the Qatari World Cup from summer to winter because of the emirates' extreme temperatures in June and July, Gay Wright raised the spectre of the unprecedented: "What if Qatar loses the 2022 World Cup?" That may be less far-fetched than meets the eye given that the losers in the race for the 2022 Cup – the United States, South Korea, Japan and Australia – could initiate legal action demanding a new vote on the grounds that a change of dates constitutes a change of the terms of the bid.

To be sure, the logic of granting Qatar the Cup made imminent sense. The Middle East and North Africa, a region where soccer has played a key role in national and social development since the late 19th century, has never hosted the world's biggest sporting event. Much of the argument against Qatar amounts to sour grapes, unjustified arrogance, and bigotry.

Debate about a change of dates has opened the door to renewed questions about the integrity of the bidding process at a time that FIFA has yet to convincingly argue that it has drawn lessons from the worst series of corruption scandals in its 108-year old history. Qatar plays into that in two ways: FIFA's executive committee voted in favour of Qatar despite its experts having raised technical issues, including the question of summer temperatures that sore beyond the 40 degrees Celsius mark, and FIFA President Sepp Blatter's own implicit admission that a FIFA investigation had been false when it concluded that Qatar had not engaged in vote swapping with Spain and Portugal, which were bidding jointly for the 2018 Cup. Blatter conceded in a BBC

interview that there had been a vote swap agreement, but dismissed it because it had produced no advantage for either party.

The incident constitutes the only confirmed case of potential wrongdoing but says more about FIFA's concepts of integrity and upholding rules and regulations than about Qatar. This is true for much of the other suspicions that have been expressed about Qatar's bid, including possible incentives offered to national soccer federations represented on the FIFA executive committee as well as the fact that the Gulf state allocated a significantly larger budget to its bid campaign compared to its competitors. All of that may raise ethical issues, but only goes to demonstrate that FIFA's bid rules have gaps in it similar to Emmentaler cheese and a political deal with former French President Nicolas Sarkozy that led to Michel Platini, head of European soccer body UEFA, voting in favour of the Qatari bid.

If most countries bid for mega sporting events as country branding exercises and potential boosts to their economy, for Qatar the cost-benefit analysis in allocating funds was one that went to its core defence and security concerns. Qatar, no matter how many sophisticated weapons it purchases, will never be able to defend itself. The 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait taught it two lessons: big brother Saudi Arabia, unable to defend itself, is an unreliable guarantor. Confidence in the reliability of the United States has since also been called into question. The international coalition that came to Kuwait's aid demonstrated that soft power and embedment into the global community at multiple levels earns one friends when in need. Qatar's soft power is vested in sports and particularly soccer.

The ability to wield that soft power is proving to be more complex than Qataris expected. The sour grapes stemming from Qatar's financial muscle, the arrogance of large nations seeking to delegitimize it on the grounds of it being tiny in population and territory, and anti-Arab and anti-Muslim prejudice threw up unexpected obstacles. So did the fact that the winning of the World Cup exposed Qatar to greater international scrutiny than ever before and made it more vulnerable to criticism by rights activists. The silver lining is that like the World Cup that imposes a timeline on Qatar's massive infrastructure projects, it potentially offers the Gulf nation a straightjacket for inevitable social reforms.

Conditions for migrant labour that accounts for the majority of Qatar's population has topped the agenda of activists with international trade unions and human rights groups threatening a boycott of the World Cup and pressuring international infrastructure contractors to adopt global standards. The issue is more than simply capitalist exploitation or what the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) terms modern slavery. To Qataris, it is existential raising fundamental question about the nature, culture and identity of a society that is theirs but in which they constitute only 15 per cent of the population. Ironically, Qatari leaders see sports as one way to strengthen national identity.

Nevertheless, the fact that the cost of maintaining an exploitative labour system and building walls between population groups goes beyond reputational damage was laid bare in a recent study by researchers of Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar published in *Perspectives on Public Health*. Their research concluded that Qatar would be near the top of the United

Nation's Human Development Index (HDI) if adjustments were made for the country's large population of migrant workers. That conclusion cuts to the core of Qatar's soft power effort to project itself as a cutting edge, 21st century knowledge-based society.

Similarly, a string of recent court cases and labour disputes have cast a shadow over Qatar's effort. Representatives of Asian American couple Matthew and Grace Huang imprisoned on charges of having murdered one of their three adopted black children argue that theirs is a "case of faulty science and what appears to be racial and cultural misunderstanding by the Qatari officials about American norms regarding international adoptions and homeschooling. The Qatari officials have to date refused to acknowledge that mistakes were made and the Huangs have been imprisoned in Qatar for nearly six months," said Alex Jakubowski of Capitol Media Partners. The Huangs moved to Qatar so that Matthew could work on a World Cup-related infrastructure project.

An investigation of the sudden death of their daughter Gloria of an eating disorder possibly due to malnutrition because of poverty before her adoption raised the Qatari authorities' suspicion. "The police investigating Gloria's death found the family situation inherently suspicious. For example, the investigative police reports repeatedly suggest that Matthew and Grace could not have had a legitimate reason to adopt children who were not 'good-looking' and who did not share their 'hereditary traits.' The investigative reports theorize that Matthew and Grace 'bought' their children in order to harvest their organs, or perhaps to perform medical experiments on them ... It appears they did not know that adoptions of children from other countries and other racial backgrounds is common in the United States.," Jakubowski said.

Earlier this year, employment-related complaints by two international players, one of whom was barred from leaving Qatar, threatened to overshadow the 2022 World Cup organizing committee's release of a charter of worker's rights designed to fend off criticism of labour conditions. In separate interviews French-Algerian player Zahir Belounis, who was locked into a salary dispute with Al Jaish SC, the club owned by the Qatari military, and Moroccan international Abdessalam Ouadoo, who left Qatar last November to join AS Nancy-Lorraine, complained about failure to honour their contracts and pay their salaries as well as ill treatment.

The legal issues play into the hands of Qatar's distracters. Like with the criticism of Qatar's labour conditions, the ball is in the Qatari court. It can adopt a defensive position seeking to counter the criticism or introduce reforms that would benefit its far more existential goal: embedment in the international community as a nation that is forging its own path in the 21st century as a forward-looking, knowledge-based, equitable model in one of the most volatile parts of the world.

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/2013/08/qatar-2022-mixed-blessing.html>

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