



COMMENTARY

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Qatar: Perfecting the Art of Scoring Own Goals

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State-owned Qatari television network Al Jazeera prides itself on hard hitting, let-the-chips-fall-where-they-fall reporting. Yet, it has systematically avoided in recent days the one story that potentially could affect the very future, shape and security of the wealthy Gulf state: controversy over the timing of the 2022 World Cup and mounting criticism of living and working conditions of up to a million unskilled and semi-skilled workers expected to build infrastructure for the tournament.

That controversy could come to a head when the executive committee of world soccer body FIFA meets to discuss the Qatari World Cup. Media reporting on and trade union agitation against often appalling conditions for foreign workers expected to be involved in the construction of tens of billions of dollars of infrastructure related to the tournament in a country in which local nationals constitute at best 15 per cent of the total population and six percent of the workforce is likely to force FIFA to go beyond its initial focus: whether to move the competition from summer to winter because of Qatar's searing summer temperatures that exceed 40 degrees Celsius.

Failure to address labour conditions in Qatar, involving both material issues such as a mounting number of work-related deaths, confiscation of passports and lack of access to basic amenities including drinking water as well as the onerous Kafala or sponsorship system that makes workers beholden to their employers would open FIFA to allegations that it cares only about the welfare of several hundred players at the expense of hundreds of thousands creating the infrastructure they need.

British newspaper The Guardian reported that 70 Nepalese labourers had died in work-related incidents in the last 18 months. Other media reports said a further 159 Indian workers had also died since the beginning of this year. Narinra Bad, a representative of the Nepalese community in the Middle East, which accounts for the largest contingent of construction workers in Qatar, said however that only 15 Nepalese nationals had died since the beginning of this year, some of them of natural causes. Qatari officials also insisted that the numbers in media reports were exaggerated.

Nepalese trade union officials attributed many of the deaths to falls because workers had not been given proper safety equipment. International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) secretary general added that “scores are dying from heat exhaustion and dehydration after 12-hour shifts in blazing heat, often during the night in the squalid and cramped labour camps with no ventilation and appalling hygiene.”

Qatar’s problems were further compounded by an embarrassing salary dispute between French-Algerian international Zahir Belounis and Qatari army club Al Jaish that threatens to ruin the player’s career. Authorities have refused to allow Belounis to leave the country for some 18 months in line with the Kafala system unless he first drops a legal case against the club.

The avalanche of negative reporting has aggravated FIFA’s dilemma. As the group sought to buy time by indicating that it would delay a decision on the timing of the Qatar tournament rather resolving the issue at this week’s executive committee meeting, FIFA ethics investigator Michael J. Garcia prepared to tour the nine countries that competed for the 2018 and 2002 World Cups. Some sources said they feared Garcia, a former New York prosecutor, may be intending to build a case against Qatar. Qatar has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing in its bid that was far better funded than that of its competitors. In a column published on the website of Al Jazeera English and Inside World Football, London-based journalist Lee Wellings asked: “Is ‘Open Season’ on Qatar fair?”

FIFA vice president Jim Boyce told Reuters in a telephone interview: “We don't need to rush into this. The World Cup is still nine years away, we have plenty of time. But we also need to look very closely at the conditions of the immigrant workers who are building the infrastructure in Qatar and will be building the stadiums there for the World Cup. I was appalled and upset after last week's stories that dozens of immigrant workers had died as a result of the conditions in Qatar and that thousands of others are being ill-treated. We cannot allow that. These people must be protected and their basic human rights safeguarded.”

What Qatar had expected to be a celebrated achievement in its projection of soft power when it won the World Cup hosting rights almost three years ago has turned into a public relations fiasco that spotlights existential questions about Qatar’s political and social system, its demographic

viability and the sustainability of its national identity. Al Jazeera's avoidance of the issue spotlights the fact that the fiasco is one of Qatar's own making.

Al Jazeera's lack of reporting goes far beyond restrictions on media in an autocratic state. It highlights the fact that Qataris remain hesitant to publicly engage their critics in a bid to demonstrate the fact that they take at least some of the criticism seriously and to explain issues that are in many ways unique to the region's smaller family-run states. Qataris are learning the hard way that their failure to engage amounted to surrender of the battlefield to their opponents and more fundamentally that winning the right to host the World Cup enhanced their prestige but also exposed their warts and gave leverage to activists campaigning for a plethora of rights, including those of workers.

The Al Jazeera avoidance of a for Qataris sensitive issue further focuses attention on the problems smaller Gulf states have as they try to get a grip on a world in which technology and social media impose greater openness, public lack of confidence in institutions and leaders has toppled governments and the need to project soft power as part of a nation's security and defence policy forces them to confront painful and existential issues.

First and foremost among these are foreign workers' rights in a part of the world that traditionally strives to ensure that non-nationals were welcome to fulfil their contracts but would be prevented from gaining a stake in society. In responding to criticism by human rights and labour activists, Qatar has gone beyond issuing lofty statements of principle in a bid to address material concerns and fend off political demands, including abolishment of the Kafala system and the granting of the right to form independent trade unions and bargain collectively.

To be sure, deflecting political issues is part autocratic reflex. It is however also a function of problems for which there are no easy solutions. Ray Jureidini, a sociologist and migration expert at Beirut's Lebanese American University, who advised the Qatar Foundation on establishing standards for the full cycle of a foreign worker's employment in Qatar, including recruitment, deployment, working and living conditions and return to country of origin, notes that abolishing of the Kafala system would amount to a significant overhaul of the Qatari economy.

"The Kafala system exists as part of an effort by Qataris to retain control of their country. Abolishing the system means opening up a labour market in a country where there is no labour market. The requirement for an exit visa is partly the result of Qatar not having extradition treaties with a lot of countries and wanting to prevent those who break the law from simply skipping the country," Jureidini says.

The Australian-Lebanese scholar concedes that Qatar would do itself a favour by publicly acknowledging the issues it faces rather than by remaining silent projecting the notion of a nation that cruelly implements a system denounced by activists as modern slavery. The same is true of

the reluctance by various Qatari institutions to freely discuss the details of steps they have or are taking to improve workers' conditions including ensuring that workers do not pay for their recruitment – a key issue with vast numbers of labourers indebted for years to corrupt and unethical middlemen who arrange for their employment.

To be sure, Qatar's existential issues do not justify harsh working and living conditions as reported by The Guardian recently. Yet, putting on the table the issues involved in resolving an intolerable situation would put the issue in perspective and allow the Gulf state to work with its critics in finding mutually acceptable solutions.

Qatari labour and social affairs minister Abdullah Saleh Al Khulaifi, in a rare instance of self-criticism, implicitly acknowledged that his government had been lax in implementing laws and regulations that human rights activists privately recognize afford workers significant protections.

They include a ban on confiscation of workers' passports after completion of immigration procedures, strict regulation of on-time payment of wages and working hours in periods of extreme heat, and guaranteed access to drinking water and proper healthcare.

Khulaifi said his ministry would increase the number of inspectors checking that companies are compliant with labour laws regarding healthcare, safety, living conditions and salaries; hire more translators to communicate with foreign workers; and establish branch offices in areas where foreign workers live.

Qatar has by and large been equally uncommunicative about the fact that criticism of its labour system since it won the World Cup has sparked internal debate. On the one hand, a recent study by the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute of Qatar University concluded that nine out of 10 Qataris favour Kafala and that some 30 per cent would like to see the system strengthened. Many Qataris, on the other hand, acknowledge privately that their country's labour system is in desperate need of reform. Kafala, moreover, is disliked not only by employees but also by many employers because it makes them liable for whatever the worker does during and outside of working hours.

Qatar like the UAE has taken its first baby steps in nibbling at the edges of issues that invokes fear of loss of identity and a national existence of one's own. In a break with the tradition of ensuring that foreigners remain aware of the fact that their presence is temporary and conditional with no prospect of ever having a strong bond to or stake in Qatari society, Qatar Stars League (QSL) earlier this year organized its first ever soccer competition for 16 teams made up of foreign workers. It is looking at creating an annual league for 32 such clubs. A Qatari sociologist went a step further, calling on Qatari sports clubs to open branches in areas where foreign workers live and scouting for talent in the labour community.

The significance of the move lies in the fact that soccer rivals religion in the Middle East and North Africa in the degree of deep-seated passion and identity that it evokes. In a city like Cairo prior to the toppling in 2011 of President Hosni Mubarak one was asked whether one was Zamalek or Ahli, the city's two storied soccer clubs, rather than where one was from. As a result of the often almost tribal emotions that the game sparks, Gulf clubs preferred to play in empty stadia rather than cater to the majority foreign population and risk their development of an emotional tie to their country of temporary residence.

In a rare public discussion of demography by a Gulf national, Sharjah intellectual and businessmen Sultan Sooud al Qassemi said in a recent Gulf News article that “the fear of naturalization is that Emiratis would lose their national identity; we are after all a shrinking minority in our own country. However, UAE national identity has proven to be more resilient and adaptive to the changing environment and times than some may believe.”

Noting that the UAE had taken a first step, by granting the offspring of mixed Emirati-non-Emirati nationals the right to citizenship, Al Qassemi pointed out that Saudi Arabia, the one country in which local nationals constitute a majority, if only a small one, was the only country in the region to have legalized procedures for naturalization. Al Qassemi went, however, a step further noting that the success of the United States was in no small part due to the contribution of immigrants.

“Perhaps it is time to consider a path to citizenship for them that will open the door to entrepreneurs, scientists, academics and other hardworking individuals who have come to support and care for the country as though it was their own,” Al Qassemi said.

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:

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