

COMMENTARY

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World Cup Emerges as Agent of Change in Qatar

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Qatar is taking a beating in the court of public opinion with almost daily headlines raising questions about the way the Gulf state does business. Yet, its hosting of the 2022 World Cup is emerging six months into the reign of Qatar's new emir as an agent of change.

Harsh working and living conditions for foreign workers who constitute the majority of the country's estimated two million inhabitants have cemented Qatar's image as a country that practices a modern form of slavery. Qatar's failure to communicate its efforts to address the criticism in structural ways that go far beyond window dressing has done little to counter that negative image.

That image is compounded by the tale of a French-Algerian soccer player who suffered serious damage to his career because he was denied an exit visa for 17 months as a result of a financial dispute with his sponsor, Al Jaish FC. For a mere €12,000 (US\$ 164,000) settlement with Zahir Belounis, Qatar could have avoided the far greater cost to its image that weeks of news coverage has cost it and that defending itself in a French court in which the player asserts that he was a victim of "fraud, inhuman working conditions, forgery and aggravated extortion of money" will cost it.

Adding insult to injury, Britain's Daily Telegraph last week disclosed that DLA Piper, the international law firm Qatar tasked with conducting an independent investigation into allegations of abuse of foreign workers involved in the construction of World Cup-related infrastructure made by Amnesty International, also acts a paid lobbyist for the state-owned Al Jazeera television network. The apparent conflict of interest raised doubts on how independent its investigation would be.

Furthermore, the sentencing last week of the former chief executive and chairman of failed Icelandic bank Kaupthing to at least five years in prison on charges of fraud and market manipulation related to the acquisition of a five per cent stake in the bank by Sheikh Mohammed Bin Khalifa Bin Hamad Al Thani, a member of Qatar's ruling family, did little to enhance the 21st century, cutting edge image the Gulf state is seeking to create through sports, arts and foreign investment as a pillar of its soft power strategy.

Much like British bank Barclays that was fined £50 million (US\$ 84.5 million) by the UK banking regulator for failing to disclose £322m (US\$ 524 million) in fees paid to Qatari investors during two cash calls and Credit Suisse's granting of a loan to Qatar as part of a SFr10 billion (US\$ 11.25) capital raise, the Kaupthing executives stand accused of having lent Sheikh Mohammed the funds he needed to buy his stake in the bank.

The stream of bad news contrasts starkly with the steps Qatari institutions are taking to address labour issues both in an effort to counter criticism and fend off demands by international trade unions for the granting of political rights such as the right to form independent unions and to collective bargaining to foreign workers and, equally important, the World Cup's breaking of taboos on discussions of such rights. In a country in which nationals account for only ten per cent of the population and a mere six per cent of the workforce and in which non-Qataris have no rights or prospects beyond fulfilling their employment contracts such debate goes to the core of the future nature of the Qatari state and society.

In an almost unprecedented vision of a future Qatar, policy strategist, columnist and businessman Jassim bin Sosibo Al Thani, a member of the ruling family that accounts for an estimated 20 per cent of all Qataris but is not one of the country's decision makers, mapped out a society that would be non-racist, non-sexist and Islamic rather than Arab and that would be inclusive in its definition of the country's youth as both Qatari and non-Qatari – a move that if adopted would radically transform Qatar.

Al Thani's vision, published in Qatar Chronicles, came as Qatar's new emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, appeared to be focusing his attention on domestic rather than foreign issues amid griping by Qataris over the country's population explosion, unchecked Westernization; inflation, and gridlock in a city that is one big construction site.

“Qatar belongs to all its youth; Arabs and non-Arabs, male and female. Every young person who was born here is a citizen of Qatar; a country on the West Asian continent. As a consequence, we are Asians regardless of race, colour, gender or creed... Our success depends on the country and continent's ability to move in a steady direction, through which we are united with one common purpose as a people together in our diversity. Thus, we propose that young people embrace the diversity that is their birth right, bearing in mind that it is not and must never be a source of

division.,” Al Thani asserted in a break with the notion that birth does not give anyone but Qataris rights and a national identity that has hitherto focused on the country being Arab.

The businessman and strategist furthermore propagated a society that would be based on Islamic values, social justice and fundamental human rights rather than although he did not say so explicitly an autocratic state in which the emir effectively has absolute power. “This commitment is based on the understanding that our society cannot move forward if today’s conditions are still the same as those of yesterday. Consequently, we have to grapple with the enduring insight that Qatar will not succeed merely on the basis of ‘stability and continuity,’” Al Thani said.

With the emir moving to apply lessons of the Singapore model by increasingly moving Qataris into positions of responsibility and streamlining Qatar’s bureaucracy and making it more efficient and responsive to people’s needs, Al Thani decried Qatari society’s “erosion of values of honesty, loyalty, social solidarity (and) commitment to the responsibilities to which we are charged whether in the private or public sectors. This is manifest in such malaise as corruption, an entitlement culture, below average performance in the work place, low levels of service to the people (customer service) accompanied by demands for more and more rewards.”

Al Thani said his comments were meant to spark discussion among youth and forge a “consensus in pursuit of building a Qatar that belongs to all who live in it.”

Taking up Al Thani’s challenge, long-term Qatari resident and Jordanian national Firas Zirie was quoted by Doha News as saying: “Consider the following anecdote – which applies to me as well as a large number of young expat professionals here: I have spent nearly all of my life in Qatar. I have been through the school and university systems and eventually got a job here and am trying to get my career on the right track. If one day, I decide to change jobs and am unable to get a No Objection Certificate from my current employer, I would have to leave the country and could not return to work for two years. This seems highly illogical, doesn’t it? And while unlikely, reality dictates that it could still happen. That possible future makes it difficult for people like myself and others in the same boat from feeling stability and security in our lives. That little niggling doubt that it could all come crashing down over a piece of paper, is always there. And it leads to social rifts and resentment.”

In emulation of the Singapore model, Zirie, rather than calling for abolition of the controversial kafala or sponsorship system proposed the introduction of a permanent resident status that “would provide flexibility for long-term residents, while reducing fears among Qataris about a dilution of their culture, a concern presented whenever naturalization is discussed.”

Yet, even naturalization in the wake of the awarding of the World Cup to Qatar is no longer a taboo subject of debate across the smaller Gulf States who all share a similar demographic dilemma. 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.

Al Thani, Zirie and Al Qassemi’s remarks reverberate in soccer. Like Qatar, United Arab Emirates soccer association Yusuf al Serkal said in an interview that his group was drawing up a roadmap and marketing campaign to move beyond catering only to nationals to attracting the vast majority of foreigners as fans of local clubs.

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.

“We used to want to protect our society. We are now going into professional football and this constitutes good marketing,” Al Serkal 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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