

COMMENTARY

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Human Rights Groups Blast Qatar with a Silver Lining

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Human rights group again blasted future World Cup host Qatar for its treatment of migrant workers. Yet, amid the criticism was an implicit recognition that the Gulf state rather than stonewalling its critics has in recent years engaged with the likes of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. It now has to demonstrate that it is serious about enforcing change.

Amnesty Secretary General Salil Shetty said Qatar could "signal that the government really means what it says about protecting workers' rights" by intervening with Lee Trading and Contracting (LTC), a company that the human rights group said had failed to pay its 80 mostly Asian workers for the past year. As a result, the group said the workers were running low on food and living in legal limbo because LTC as their sponsor had failed to acquire residence permits for them without which they cannot seek alternative employment.

"I spent six months in Qatar but did not receive a single rupee. I was reluctant to come back home as I didn't earn any money ... When I got home my wife was weeping and even I did not feel good. I still feel very guilty. I have not done anything since I got back. I just sit at home looking after my children ... When I was abroad, my wife took out more loans as my children were ill, so our debt grew to this huge amount. The only way I can pay it off is by going back abroad ... If people asked for my advice, I would say Qatar is not a good place, so don't go to Qatar. I had a very hard time there," said Ravi Kumar, a Nepalese worker who worked in Qatar for a different company than LTC, in an interview with The Guardian.

Kumar said he would at times go for 24 hours without food – "12 hours' work and then no food all night. When I complained, my manager assaulted me, kicked me out of the labour camp I lived in and refused to pay me anything. I had to beg for food from other workers."

Kumar's experience notwithstanding, Shetty's remarks reflected the fact that Qatar has worked with human rights groups since winning in late 2010 its bid to host the 2010 World Cup and has taken a number of steps to improve the living and working conditions of migrant workers who constitute a majority of the Gulf state's population. In contrast to countries like the United Arab Emirates that recently won a bid to host the 2020 World Expo, Qatar has allowed human rights groups to conduct research and announce their mostly damning findings at news conferences in the Gulf state, an occurrence that would have been unthinkable prior to its winning of its World Cup bid. By comparison, the UAE has in the same time period forced critical research centres to close down and is barring an increasing number of foreign scholars, including Qatari nationals, from entering the country.

Human Rights Watch this week, in another indication of a perception of Qatari willingness to engage and acknowledgement of the need to maintain pressure, called on Gulf states to do more to guarantee workers' rights and urged the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation to use its member states' collective bargaining power to ensure better protection for their citizens in the Gulf.

Beyond the issuance of charters of workers' rights by the Qatar 2022 Supreme Committee and the Qatar Foundation that if implemented would radically alter the cycle of workers' migration, Qatari officials have promised to improve law implementation and enforcement of labour laws and regulations that would prevent cases like LTC. Qatar, by the same token however, earlier this year detained and deported a German television crew that was undercover filming workers in the Gulf state.

In an interview with The Guardian earlier this month, an unidentified Nepalese worker acknowledged change. "That is partly because of the winter, which makes it much easier. But it's also because the bosses are worried. They feel the eyes of the Qataris for the first time. Our bosses are not from here. They are Indians, or Arabs from Jordan, and Lebanon. They are the middle-men. They have been out of control, but now they are scared," the worker said.

Speaking during a sports conference in Doha earlier this month, 2022 committee secretary general Hassan al-Thawadi noted that "we have awarded our first contracts for early work on the al-Wakrah Stadium and I am very proud to say that it contains in it provisions for our workers welfare standards and addresses issues from accommodation to remuneration."

Qatar's strategy of engagement, amid a wave of condemnatory media reporting, is intended to ensure that its sports policy and diplomacy succeeds in projecting soft power. It also is designed to use the improvement of migrant workers' living and working conditions as a tool to fend off sensitive political demands by international trade unions, including granting workers the right to freely form unions and engage in collective bargaining.

Implicit in the human rights groups' acknowledgement of Qatari engagement is a message: the success of Qatar's soft power approach that builds on its sports, arts and investment policies has focused attention on the dark side of the Gulf state's oil wealth-fuelled defence, security, development and modernization. To successfully project soft power, Qatar will have to take the lead with bold labour reforms. While Qatari officials embrace the principle of reform, Qatar has however so far stumbled in its efforts to avoid further reputational damage and turn the tide of negative reporting around. It's a lesson other Gulf States like the UAE's Dubai with its hosting of the World Expo can learn from.

That may be easier said than done. Labour reforms go the core of a far more delicate and existential issue in Qatar and other smaller Gulf states: many of the smaller Gulf states like Qatar host migrant and expatriate communities that outnumber locals by a factor of up to 10:1. Many locals fear that any change, including a revision or abolition of the kafala or sponsorship system, would endanger the nature of as well as their grip on society and threaten their culture.

That fear is reflected in a refusal among some Qataris in contrast to the government to entertain legitimate criticism that they reject as racially biased and anti-Qatari. Aani Khathon, an associate editor of Qatari news website Qatar Chronicle that features a commentator who takes controversial positions charged in an email that this blog's reporting and analysis was part of "the minority in the Western media's current anti-Qatar agenda" and reflected "racial bias against our people."

The commentator who publishes under the name, Jassim bin Sosibo Al Thani, and whose analysis at times transcends conventional Qatari thinking and suggests a more Islamic than Arab nationalist approach, this week extolled Qatar's massive foreign buying and investment spree, including its acquisition of French soccer team Paris Saint Germaine and the launch of sports television channel beIN Sport as well as what he saw as Qatar's foreign policy achievements. "Qatar reaffirms that she is awaking from her sleep, Qatar is digging herself out of the Bermuda Triangle dug by Arab nationalism," Thani wrote.

Earlier, the writer defined Qatar as an Islamic rather than an Arab state and in a break with mainstream Qatari thinking suggested that anyone born in Qatar should be considered Qatari. Qatar has no naturalization law, but has granted citizenship to those with only one Qatari parent.

Members of the extended ruling Al Thani family and others knowledgeable about Qatari affairs have questioned Al Thani's identity. They note that he is not listed in a family tree, is unknown to other Al Thanis who have been unable to ascertain his identity, writes his name in a way that deviates from family norms and that his online presence on social media dates back only to September. Fuelling speculation, Khathon, the Chronicle's associate editor, refused to entertain questions on whether Al Thani was a member of the ruling family.

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<http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2013/12/human-rights-groups-blast-qatar-with.html>

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