

COMMENTARY

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Trade Union Call for a Freeze on Kafala puts Qatar to the Test

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Qatar's response to a call by international trade unions to freeze its controversial sponsorship system for foreign workers injured in a gas leak and separate gas explosion is likely indicate the Gulf state's willingness to reform or abolish a scheme that critics denounce as a form of modern slavery and Qataris see as a protective wall against loss of control of their country.

Qatar has been fighting an uphill battle to limit substantial damage to its reputation in the wake of its winning in 2010 of the right to host the 2022 World Cup as a result of criticism of the working and living conditions of its foreign workers. The number of foreign workers, already a majority of the tiny state's population, is expected to rise substantially as construction of World Cup-related infrastructure kicks into high gear.

Qatar has responded to the criticism, fuelled by reports of annually hundreds of deaths of predominantly Asian workers allegedly as a result of working conditions, by issuing improved safety, security and welfare standards, and pledging to step up enforcement of existing rules and regulations.

The moves are designed to protect Qatar's projection of itself as a cutting edge 21st century nation, fight off calls that it be deprived of its right to hold the world's foremost sports tournament, and fend off demands that it dismantle its controversial sponsorship or kafala system that subjects workers to the whims of their employers, and allow labour to freely organize and engage in collective bargaining.

In a statement, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), one of Qatar's harshest critics, asked the Qatari labour ministry to grant amnesty from the kafala system to dozens of people injured last week in a gas leak at a chemical plant and 35 others wounded in a separate gas explosion at a restaurant that killed at least 12 people. It also asked the ministry to support potential damage claims.

“Migrant workers are trapped in Qatar under the strict kafala system.... Injured workers face being stuck there without being able to work, without pay, in a country where your employer owns you, sharing a room with ten grown men recuperating from injuries. We are appealing to the Qatari Government to grant a kafala amnesty to injured workers giving them the choice to change employers, or to leave the country with their end of service benefit,” the statement quoted ITUC general secretary Sharan Burrow. Workers require their sponsor's permission to seek alternative employment or leave the country under the kafala system.

In response to a question, ITUC spokeswoman Gemma Swart confirmed that the statement was intended to test Qatari intentions of how far it is willing to go in addressing concerns about living and working conditions of foreign workers as well as the legal and political environment in which they operate.

The ITUC's challenge comes as world soccer body FIFA gears up for an executive committee meeting in which the issue of Qatari labour will feature prominently on the agenda. FIFA executive Theo Zwanziger told the European parliament last month that the Qatari labour controversy had increased the importance of factoring human rights into future awarding of World Cup hosting rights.

Striking a more positive note towards Qatar, FIFA vice president Prince Ali Bin Al Hussein told Inside World Football that labour had become “the crucial issue” but that Qatar could resolve it “if they set their minds to it... Maybe they feel sometimes a little bit guarded because of what they perceive as the level of attention,” Prince Ali said.

Embracing the ITUC's call on the grounds of compassion would earn Qatar significant brownie points in a crucial battle in which it has found itself continuously on the defensive. Those risks include becoming more vulnerable to international pressure to abolish the kafala system and domestic criticism from a significant segment of society that sees sponsorship as one way for Qataris, who account for at most 15 per cent of the population, to retain control of their state, society and culture. It would also be seen as an indication that Qatar may be willing to entertain significant reform if not abolition of the kafala system – something it has so far refused.

By the same token, Qatar risks that workers affected by last week's incident get caught up in the restrictions of the system, which would further damage its reputation.

The labour controversy puts Qatar in a Catch-22. It undermines achievement of a key goal of the Gulf state's heavy investment in sports, including the World Cup: the development of the kind of soft power that would compensate for the absence of the hard military power to defend itself. That soft power is dependent on its ability to embed itself at multiple levels in the international community.

Yet, its public image has been tainted by the labour controversy. Reversing that involves existential and painful decisions that go to the very nature of society. Granting political rights and greater freedoms to workers and other foreigners would significantly alter the character of a state in which nationals are a small minority.

The labour issue raises for Qataris existential issues for which there is no immediate politically feasible solution. Like other smaller Gulf States where nationals constitute a minority, Qatar has long grappled inconclusively with how to address the problem.

However in contrast to other Gulf states, Qatar has become the battleground because of its hosting of the World Cup which gave leverage to trade unions with real clout – 175 million members in 15 countries – as opposed to human rights groups that have long criticized the Gulf's foreign worker region but have predominantly moral authority.

Qatar may take comfort in the fact that it may not be alone in the frontline for long. Dubai has potentially put itself in the same league with its winning of the hosting of the 2020 World Expo. The expo may not evoke the kind of passion the World Cup does but Dubai, always seeking the limelight, will likely be unable to avoid the kind of scrutiny Qatar is already being subjected to.

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