

COMMENTARY

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2022 World Cup Emerges as Engine of Change

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The 2022 World Cup is emerging as an engine of social and possible political reform in the Gulf, a region that is desperately trying to ring fence a simmering groundswell clamouring for change that has its roots in widespread social, economic and political discontent, toppled four Arab autocrats in recent years, and led to a brutal civil war in Syria.

Pressure by human rights and trade union activists as well as the United Nations on World Cup host Qatar, perhaps the most stable of the six wealthy, energy-rich Gulf states, to reform its restrictive labour system is proving to be a monkey wrench that is rippling throughout the region and could spark change that goes far beyond the rights and working and living conditions of migrant labour that account for a majority of the population in much of the region.

It is also sparking pressure on other states in the region. Prominent artists have called for a boycott of the Guggenheim museum being built on Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island, one of several high profile museums planned to position the emirate as a sponsor of the arts and a tourism destination, in protest against the conditions of workers involved in the construction. The artists are leveraging their campaign to press for an overall change of labour conditions in the United Arab Emirates where Dubai could well be drawn into the firing line with its hosting of the 2020 World Expo.

The initial signs of change are tentative and have yet to be bolstered by robust legislation and implementation but are sparking a process that is likely to be irreversible, take on dynamics of its own that Gulf regimes may find hard to control, and is part of a growing realization in the region that it cannot escape global demands for greater transparency and accountability.

That realization was evident beyond the labour issue in recent weeks with traditionally secretive, major state-owned companies such as Qatar Airways and the Investment Corporation of Dubai (ICD) that owns Emirates airlines among other of the emirate's crown jewels, publishing their

results for the first time to counter criticism by Western governments and airlines of unfair competition and restore investor confidence.

In doing so, Dubai also laid bare one of the region's most fundamental problems: the fact that ruling families run many of the region's states as family corporations. ICD reported that Dubai ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al- Maktoum had put in June 2011 ICD-controlled real estate assets worth US\$44 billion under his personal control.

Similarly, the World Cup-driven pressure on Qatar has laid bare the region's long-standing, largely ignored lack of workers' rights and abominable living and working conditions. The pressure has already sparked initial social change on the soccer pitch in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates with clubs and federations that traditionally catered only to their country's minority citizenry reaching out to foreign workers, tinkering in Saudi Arabia with restrictive rules applicable to foreign labour and the terms of labour contracts, a declared intention by the UAE to become a global benchmark of labour safety and security, and protest demonstrations by migrant workers in Lebanon.

The sports outreach to foreign workers constitutes a break with a regional policy that sought to maintain Chinese walls between nationals and foreigners by minimizing social contact, segregating citizens by ensuring that they distinguished themselves with their flowing robes and head dress in the way they dressed, and positioning non-nationals as the other.

In perhaps the most far-reaching indication of legal change, Qatar last week received an extensive report it commissioned law firm DLA Piper to draft on the status of labour conditions in the country and measures it should take to accommodate international criticism.

Qatari officials say they are about to unveil legislation that would substantially reform their country's kafala or sponsorship system that puts workers at the mercy of their employers. Those reforms would include transferring sponsorship from individual or corporate employers to the government, give workers the right to seek alternative employment, and ease the exit visa system that prevents foreigners from leaving the country without their employer's permission.

The legal reforms coupled with the adoption of lofty principles by Qatari institutions such as the World Cup's Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy and Qatar Foundation that ensure workers' welfare and seek to put an end to corruption in the recruitment system that puts workers into debt even before they arrive in the Gulf state and for the Gulf unprecedented Qatari engagement with its critics are unlikely to put criticism to bed.

On the contrary, they are the start of a process that like the disclosure of corporate results will highlight underlying fundamental problems and fuel demand for further reform. Short-term, human rights groups, trade unions, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Human Rights Council are unlikely to drop their demand for complete abolition of the kafala system. They are also likely to insist that reforms include groups not included in the measures such as domestic personnel and workers in fishing and agriculture.

A report and debate in the UN Council this week in which more than 30 countries took Qatar to task on its worker and human rights record suggested that demands would not be restricted to labour issues.

Representative of various governments called for further measures to combat gender inequality including a lifting of the ban of granting Qatari citizenship to the children of Qatari women married to foreigners that goes to the core of the Gulf's state skewed demography with Qataris accounting for only 12 percent of the population that is at the heart of many of these issues, and ensure freedom of expression threatened by new, restrictive draft media and cybercrime laws. Representatives of the United States and Britain demanded the release of Mohamad Al-Ajami, a Qatari poet jailed for 15 years on charges of insulting the former Emir.

The stakes for Qatar and other Gulf states under World Cup-driven pressure to adhere to international labour and human rights standards and adopt greater transparency are high. Development, including infrastructure, and the employment of sports and the arts to gain the kind of soft and subtle power capable of compensating their lack of hard power has created with the influx of foreign labour an unsustainable demography in which citizens often constitute a small minority of the population.

There are no good solutions for citizenry that wants to maintain its cultural and national identity as well as control of their society and ruling family's determined to keep a grip on their fiefdoms. Change threatens to open a Pandora's Box. That is one reason why Gulf states have been slow in addressing the labour issue and why it took the World Cup to push it to the top of the agenda despite at least Qatari leaders like former prime minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabor Al Thani admitting already in 2007, according to the Mumbai Mirror, that "it is difficult to retain the exit permit system in its existing form... it is being likened to slavery. It can't remain like this."

Sports and arts policies have put the Gulf States' warts in the spotlight and threaten to thwart the key soft and subtle power objectives of the heavy investments involved. A YouGov poll in Britain last September showed 79 percent of those polled opposed to the awarding of the World Cup to Qatar and 78 percent favouring the tournament being moved to another country. A similar survey about Qatar Airways showed that the country's airline had succeeded where it's hosting of the World Cup had failed: 96 percent of those polled rated the airline from positive to very positive.

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