

COMMENTARY

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World Cup sparks change as soccer puts chink in Qatari segregation

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Qatar is employing soccer to put a significant first chip in the Chinese wall that segregates its minority citizenry from its majority foreign labour and expatriate population.

The move that Qatari officials say is one of the undertakings they made in their successful bid to host the 2022 World Cup constitutes a first tentative step by a Gulf state towards some form of integration of non-nationals in a region largely populated by states in which citizens account for only a small percentage of the population.

The step breaks with a regional policy that was designed to give foreigners no illusion that their welcome was limited to the period of their contract and discouraged integration and inter-action with Qatari nationals to prevent them from sprouting roots. For Qataris, it involves embarking on a risky and scary road that many recognize as necessary and unavoidable but nonetheless may unleash dynamics they no longer will be able to control and that could force fundamental changes in the social and political structure of their society.

The move, involving a Workers Cup in which 24 teams of foreign workers established by their employers, mostly construction companies, could see the Cup's top clubs play against Qatar's top league teams in a Super Cup later this year. The Cup that ended this week is in its second year after having been launched with an initial 16 teams.

For Qataris sports clubs, the move has served to dramatically raise spectator numbers in a region where with the exception of Saudi Arabia stadium attendance is historically low.

Nasser Yaacoubi, marketing manager of Al Ahli Doha, one of Qatar's top league clubs owned by a member of the ruling Al Thani family and a pioneer of forging sports bridges between Qataris and non-Qataris, has seen his efforts triple stadium attendance. "Everybody likes football,

everybody loves the ball. We reached the stage where we realize that there is a huge potential support base that we can tap into,” he said.

In a country in which stadium attendance was at best a couple of thousand, Yaacoubi, a former player, says 10,152 Qatari’s and non-Qataris attended the club’s most recent league match. That was achieved not only by opening club facilities to non-Qataris, but also by coupling the league game to a back-to-back friendly between the national teams of Nepal and the Philippines, who supply much of Qatari labour.

Qatari officials said initiatives like that of Yaacoubi were in line with promises they made in the bidding for the World Cup. Qatar pledged in its bid to initiate “a broad set of programs to promote the sustained integration (of foreigners) into Qatari life with football as the fulcrum” that would include “a forum that would connect migrant workers and expatriates with local football clubs and register existing amateur leagues with the QFA (Qatar Football Association)” as well as funding for equipment, facilities and leagues. Qatari officials said amateur leagues like those associated with universities and schools were now open to all residents irrespective of nationality.

The undertakings coupled with massive criticism by international trade unions and human rights groups in the wake of its winning the right to host the 2022 World Cup has forced Qatar to seriously address an existential problem for which there is no immediate solution: how does a citizenry that constitutes a mere 12 percent of the population give rights to its 88 percent foreign majority without losing control of its society, state and culture? How Qatar addresses that question is likely to have a ripple effect across the Gulf.

It is a debate that has long simmered in Qatar and other Gulf states but only exploded into the public domain with the avalanche of criticism by the unions and human rights groups.

A series of articles in *The Peninsula*, a Qatari English-language newspaper, last year portrayed various aspects of the lives of migrant workers, including informal self-organized money pools that constitute a rudimentary social security system for workers and the lack of entertainment and relaxation opportunities as well as access to the Internet.

Qatar University sociologist Kaltham Al Al-Ghanim noted in an article that unskilled foreign workers were not included in the country’s National Strategy for Social Security (2011-16). “Isolating these large sections of our population can make them vulnerable to crime. They can be a challenge to social security,” she said.

In a break with the past dominated by the fear that a foreigners association with a sport club would spark identification and a sense of belonging, Ms. Al-Ghanim, called on the country’s sports clubs to set up branches in the Industrial Zone “to channel their (workers’) energy to productive avenues and hunt for sporting talent.” She cautioned that if foreign workers were allowed to “live on the social fringes, the danger is they would take to illegal activities and emerge as a threat to social security.”

While the Workers Cup is unlikely to satisfy Qatar's critics who have demanded the abolition of its kafala or sponsorship system that puts employees at the mercy of their employers as well as recognition of workers' rights to establish independent trade unions and bargain collectively it does constitute one more step in unprecedented engagement by the Gulf state.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter, in Hong Kong on Thursday for the inauguration of the Hong Kong Football Association's new offices put the responsibility for improving workers' conditions on Qatar after being confronted by protesters. "They have a problem and we know that but this is not a question for FIFA. It is one which the state of Qatar must handle as well as all the construction companies who are responsible for the workers," Blatter said.

A major litmus test is looming as Qatar prepares to announce what it says will be a major overhaul rather than the abolition of the kafala system. The reforms are expected to include shifting sponsorship from employers to the government and granting workers greater freedoms such as the right to change employers after serving notice. Workers currently need their employers' permission to change jobs.

Another litmus test is likely to be whether enhanced welfare standards adopted by the 2022 Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy that is responsible for delivery of the World Cup for all contracts related to the tournament as well as similar standards approved by Qatar Foundation are integrated into the law of the land.

"Qatar has opened the door. How open it is remains to be seen. Nevertheless, Qatar is treading on uncharted ground," said a foreign diplomat who monitors labour issues closely. "Qatar's critics will continue to wield a stick certainly as long as Qatar has not reached a point of no return. Getting to that point of no return is now the key issue."

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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