

Qatar's Human Rights Record: Doha Calls into Question Its Sincerity in Pushing World Cup-Driven Reform

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For much of the last six years since winning the hosting rights of the 2022 World Cup, Qatar appeared to be taking a slow and torturous path towards some degree of reform. Yet, in an increasingly conservative world in which human rights are put on the backburner, fears among rights and trade union activists that lofty Qatari promises of labour reform and some degree of greater liberalism may not be much more than just lofty undertakings appear to be gaining steam.

To be sure, the controversial awarding of the hosting rights has contributed to more open discussion in Qatar of hitherto taboo subjects including the rights of workers who constitute the vast majority of the population of the tiny, energy-rich Gulf state; the definition of Qatari identity; what rights, if any, non-Qataris should have in obtaining Qatari citizenship; and the rights and social position of women and gays.



A 28-year old Qatari, in the latest pushing of the envelope that brings into the open issues that in the past were kept private because of Qataris' sense of privacy and family honour, earlier this month decried in an article in [Doha News](#) that government policy denies young men and women the right to marry the person of their choice.

Writing under the pseudonym Yousef, the young Qatari described how he was forced to

divorce his wife of East European origin after the government refused to sanction the marriage and give his spouse a residence permit because she was not a Muslim even though she had converted.

“Our marriage changed me. It took me outside my bubble, and made me question our culture’s values. I didn’t understand why, for example, we Qatari men are allowed to go to clubs where alcohol is served, but at the same time the committee was telling me that my wife’s culture and traditions did not fit ours. This was not making any sense to me,” Yousef wrote.

“I feel that the Qatari government is playing with people’s lives. It hurt to see my country talking about human rights on the global stage, but then denying citizens the right to marry whoever they choose. I want to know why my request was refused. Was it because my family isn’t important enough? Do we not know the right people? I know plenty of Qatari men married to foreign women who got their approval in less than a month, just because they know someone in the government. And why is it ok to marry a second wife or a third wife, but refuse a man permission to marry just one? he added.

Yousef ultimately came to the conclusion that “I will have to leave Qatar and live abroad if I want to get married to a foreigner. I hate that it has to be like that. I love my country. I don’t want to leave Qatar or leave my family, but what options do I have?”

Like the rights of migrant workers caught in a sponsorship system that puts them at the mercy of their employers, Yousef’s plight goes to the heart of Qatar’s most existential problem: the viability of a demography in which the citizenry accounts for a mere 12 percent of the population and fears that any change will endanger their grip on their society, culture and state.

Six years into the preparations for the 2022 World Cup, the belief among many activists as well as world soccer body FIFA officials that Qatar’s stark demographic reality was forcing it to move slowly on reforming, if not abolishing the sponsorship or kafala system is wearing thin.

To be sure, Qatar in the wake of the awarding of the World Cup and in contrast to other Gulf states initially cooperated with its critics who took it to task for the labour and living conditions of workers constructing World Cup-related infrastructure. The Qatari 2022 committee as well as a few other major Qatari organizations adopted standards and model contracts in cooperation with the likes of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

New measures designed to streamline and curtail abuse of the sponsorship or kafala system are scheduled to come into law before the end of the year. The measures fall short however of granting workers’ basic rights.

Against the backdrop of [a recent Amnesty report](#) that counters assertions of the Qatari committee that it is applying the standards but cannot enforce them on non-World Cup contractors, FIFA is likely to take on more direct responsibility for the issue and come under greater pressure regarding the labour issue.

With a Dutch trade union taking FIFA to court in Switzerland on the issue of labour rights in the Gulf state, the soccer body has announced that starting with the Qatar World Cup it would scrap local organising committees for its flagship event.

The 52-page Amnesty report listed eight ways in which World Cup workers employed for the showcase Khalifa International Stadium were still being abused and exploited. It charged that despite efforts to the contrary workers still pay absorbent recruitment fees, live in appalling conditions, are lured to Qatar with false salary and job promises, do not get paid on time, cannot freely leave Qatar or change jobs, and are threatened by employers when they dare complain.

The Qatari 2022 Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy asserted in a statement that “challenges in worker conditions existing during early 2015” that had been identified by Amnesty had largely been addressed by June of this year. It said the problems involved four of some 40 companies involved in work on the Khalifa stadium and that three of those firms had been banned

“The tone of Amnesty International’s latest assertions paint a misleading picture and do nothing to contribute to our efforts. We have always maintained this World Cup will act as a catalyst for change — it will not be built on the back of exploited workers. We wholly reject any notion that Qatar is unfit to host the World Cup,” the statement said.

The Qatari committee, in a further indication that Qatar may be backtracking on promises, said that current restrictions on alcohol consumption would be upheld during the World Cup. Qatar had earlier said that venues for alcohol consumption would be expanded from hotel bars to specific locations around the country during the tournament.

Not that alcohol is the litmus test of a successful Qatari World. The tournament moreover may attract a different demography with far more fans from the Middle East, North Africa and the Muslim world who care less about alcohol than their Western counterparts.

Nonetheless, the backtracking on alcohol coupled with increasingly strained Qatari relations with human rights groups and trade unions, and the snail pace of labour reform casts a shadow on Qatari sincerity.

Qatar may well feel that the rise of populist leaders across the globe could reduce pressure on it to embark on real reform. That could be true. Yet, by the same token, populist leaders who ride a wave of nationalism may also have to also be seen to be standing up for the rights of their nationals working in foreign lands.

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