Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup: Exploitation of Workers

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Abstract—This brief explains the human rights abuses that have arisen due to an increasing demand for migrant labor in Qatar as a result of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. It details the methods of labor exploitation specifically being used in Qatar, as well as the impacts they have had on migrant workers. Finally, it analyzes the cause of labor reform in Qatar, as well as the efficacy of such reforms in regards to the hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

Keywords—Qatar, FIFA, Kafala, Labor Abuses, and Boycott

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sustained protests from migrant workers in Qatar have grabbed the attention of the international sports community as the date of the Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup approaches. This brief explains the long history of labor abuses towards migrant workers, specifically in relation to construction for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Finally, through an analysis of recent labor reforms within Qatar, the brief analyzes the efficacy of these reforms and considers future approaches needed to ensure the continuation of labor reforms in Qatar.

II. OVERVIEW

In December of 2010, Sepp Blatter, the former president of FIFA, announced that Qatar won the bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup, making it the first Middle Eastern country to ever host the event. Following the announcement, concerns over the legitimacy of the bidding process grew, as Qatar was an illogical choice given its lack of proper infrastructure and excessive heat. As such, competing nations, specifically the U.S., were skeptical over the decision. After investigating the issue, the U.S. Department of Justice “revealed details about money paid to five members of FIFA’s top board” to ensure a successful bid for Qatar. Qatar denied the claims and, without a proper investigation from FIFA, it maintained its rights to host. As such, Qatar continued with preparation and construction for the event.

A. Pointed Summary

➢ Large influx of migrant workers into Qatar
➢ Reports of human rights abuses accompanied with migrant protests

B. Relevance

To aid in construction for the World Cup, a large influx of migrants from many countries—including Nepal, Bangladesh, and India—entered Qatar as migrant workers, causing the Qatari population to grow by 40%. By 2017, 2.1 million migrant workers resided in Qatar. However, shortly after this influx, reports of human rights abuses against migrant workers began to come out of the country. Complaints manifested into boycotts, protests, and strikes, which lasted all the way into 2022.

III. HISTORY

Qatar’s record of human rights abuses and societal inequality has long been a concern. Women in Qatar are restricted by the male guardianship law, which requires them to obtain permission from male guardians to marry, travel abroad, and receive reproductive healthcare. Furthermore, homosexuality is illegal in Qatar and can be even punishable by death. In the context of FIFA 2022, the primary speculation is around the injustices of the kafala system.

Beginning in the 1950s, the kafala system was introduced among Gulf countries such as Qatar, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia to supply cheap migrant labor. Under this system, a state gives domestic companies or individuals sponsorship permits to employ foreign laborers. However, kafala isn’t overseen by labor ministries, leaving workers vulnerable to exploitation. Since private citizens...
have total control over workers’ legal statuses and residency, the kafala system is rooted in an unbalanced power dynamic that sponsors can exploit. Under the system, workers need permission to enter or exit Qatar and risk imprisonment or deportation even when fleeing abuse.27 Often, workers are coerced to sign contracts and may unwittingly accept unfair wages and poor working conditions. Employers also regularly confine workers in overcrowded and unsanitary dorms, putting workers at risk of COVID-19 and in various other diseases.27

Qatar relies on migrant labor – primarily from South Asia – for the construction of its football stadium ahead of FIFA 2022. According to Amnesty International, more than 3,200 workers work on the Khalifa Stadium every day, with over 230 men abused and exploited.24 Not only do recruitment agents make false promises about worker salaries, but salaries are sometimes not paid for several months, pushing workers to the brink of desperation.24 In addition, workers have their passports confiscated and are confined to the stadium and workers’ camp. Those who refuse to work are threatened with pay cuts, imprisonment, or deportation.24

A. Tried Policy

Nevertheless, in 2017, after widespread international pressure, the Qatari government signed an agreement with the United Nations’ International Labor Organization, in which Qatar announced its “commitment to align its laws and practices with international labor standards.”23 Following the agreement, Qatar introduced labor reforms in an attempt to reduce migrant labor abuses. After establishing labor committees and support systems to aid migrant financial struggles, the Qatari government adopted the “Domestic Workers Law”, which outlines new protections such as a maximum 10-hour workday, at least 24 consecutive hours of rest each week, and three weeks of annual leave.3 Furthermore, Qatar removed the requirement of “exit permits”, which made it so that workers could leave the country without their employers’ permission, and “No-Objection Certificate,” which prevented workers from changing their job without their employer’s permission.

However, Amnesty International reports that “weak implementation and enforcement of reforms” leaves thousands of workers still “at the mercy of unscrupulous employers.”25 Even without an absence of enforcement, many of the reforms still do not abide by the same standards expected of citizen labor laws, as they fail to address issues regarding payment, deceptive recruitment, oppressive employer control, and lack of bargaining power.21 As such, labor abuses continue to go unnoticed, and labor reforms in Qatar have become stagnant, despite an estimate of over 6,500 deaths.25

B. Current Stances

Qatar’s reaction to the migrant worker death crisis has been tepid. In response to the deaths, a Qatari government spokesperson stated that “The mortality rate among these communities is within the expected range for the size and demographics of the population. However, every lost life is a tragedy, and no effort is spared in trying to prevent every death in our country.”17 Yet, the lack of action from the Qatari government proves this statement false. In 2014, the Qatari government’s own lawyers, DLA Piper, investigated construction migrant labor in Qatar.2 The firm concluded that one of the keys to improving the situation would be to “allow for the proper investigation into unexpected or sudden deaths” along with recommending that autopsies “of human bodies are extended to allow for… examinations in cases of unexpected or sudden deaths.”19 These suggestions have not been taken, and, to this day, migrant deaths are still not properly investigated.19

The 2022 World Cup is imperative to the Qatari government’s strategy to increase soft power via sports. In 2011, Qatar Sports Investments (QSI) bought Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) and transformed the football club into a dynasty in France and one of the best teams in the world (though a Champions League trophy continues to elude the club). Qatar has invested $1.6 billion into the club, earning the nickname “the best club money can buy” from the casual supporter.28 The club has used the money of the regime to acquire Lionel Messi, Neymar Jr, Kylian Mbappe, and many other elite footballers.7 Government-owned entities like Qatar Airways sponsor Bayern Munich, the most successful team in
Germany (though this sponsorship has drawn the ire of club members). All of these investments serve Qatari soft power interests, as they normalize business relations with recognizable western institutions.

The increased soft power that Qatar has gained from investments into sports aids Qatar’s National Vision 2030. Motivated by the recognition that Qatar needed to diversify economic interests and to make the country more sustainable long-term, the vision was initiated in 2008. The plan has four pillars: Human Development, Social Development, Economic Development, and Environmental Development. The economic phase of the plan looks to diversify Qatar’s interests beyond just oil and gas. Qatar has attempted to do this via mass investments into infrastructure, (which created the demand for migrant workers), with the goal being to make Qatar a viable tourist destination. Qatar’s investment into infrastructure and sports coalesce at the 2022 World Cup.

In 2010 FIFA awarded the 2022 World Cup to Qatar, but the decision has been met with anger due to Qatar’s track record regarding human rights. Allegations of corruption surrounding the decision have also been prominent following the FIFA corruption scandal, where top FIFA officials, including at the time FIFA President Sepp Blatter, were indicted on charges of widespread corruption. In 2017 FIFA attempted to rehabilitate its image by publishing a Human Rights Policy for host nations, which stated that host nations of FIFA must have a good track record in recognizing human rights. The human rights initiatives are a step in the right direction, but the continuation of hosting the 2022 World Cup in Qatar demonstrates that FIFA’s platitudes regarding the respect of human rights may only be just platitudes.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

One of the critical effects of Qatar’s indifference towards labor rights is the global protest of the games set to stage soon. Last year the Netherlands national team wore shirts with words saying “Football supports change”. Recently, Norway players wore t-shirts reading “HUMAN RIGHTS” and “On and off the pitch”. Many of the boycott campaigns even demanded that Norway’s Football Federation (NFF) take the chance to boycott the games, although NFF made the decision not to in a voting session with delegates.

Following Norway, German players took a similar approach by wearing t-shirts reading “human rights” ahead of the Die Mannschaft World cup qualifier games. With the treatment of migrant workers and the abuses of human rights being revealed, footballers themselves have taken action publicly in order to bring the issue to the broader sports industry. Meanwhile, immediate reforms remain unlikely as both the organization and Qatar have been discussing the “social change being achieved in the country”.

B. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Despite previous reforms, the case for companies ignoring new laws and refusing to pay workers fairly still remains an apparent problem. As of January 2022, 205 allegations regarding worker abuse have been reported, with only 62% of wage delays and 41% of construction cases involving abuse having been reported, according to migrant workers. In efforts to combat the still existing shadows of the kafala system and push for change, Qatar would need to listen to both workers and industries in order to avoid previously failed reforms to the system in 2015. This would require a continuous push for change and substantial action from Qatar.

V. POLICY OPTIONS

As the tournament date nears and protests about the location rise in abundance, pressure is mounting on FIFA and the Qatari government. Discluding total inaction, there are effectively three likely routes forward: 1) possibility of relocation; 2) comprehensive labor reform; and 3) boycotts.

Possibility of Relocation

The simplest and most demanded solution is relocation. Such a decision would have to be made by FIFA and is complicated by the shortening time frame. More importantly, the rights to host the World Cup come with innumerable economic and
political benefits – those of which Qatari officials would be more than frustrated to lose.

Given FIFA granted Qatar the contract “without human rights due diligence or imposing labor rights conditions” while knowing that migrant workers would be relied on to fill the “massive infrastructure deficit,” the likelihood that FIFA would voluntarily elect to relocate is small. It is no help that FIFA lacks a strong track record with their hosting selections, coming under fire for selecting Russia to host the 2018 World Cup.

### Comprehensive Labor Reform

The best route, in order to create enduring change within Qatar, is using the pressure from the World Cup’s attention to push forward on labor reform issues. Some progress has been made, as the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy “put in place additional protections specifically for migrant construction workers [. . . ], which led to better working conditions.” However, these reforms are largely lacking, only applying to “1.5 percent of Qatar’s overall migrant population.”

Even then, many claim that present reforms are failing to do enough, as in an interview with The Guardian, more than 40 migrant workers at a single construction site said “nothing much has changed.”

That is to say, current attempts at labor reform within Qatar appear to be an attempt to quell rising public and international discontent rather than making sincere progress on labor issues. Systemic changes are more likely to come as a result of deep-set political changes within Qatar, but the international attention being brought on by the World Cup controversy may help to speed up that process.

### Boycotts

Boycotts serve to directly and negatively impact the success of the games – a concern for both FIFA and the Qatari government. One of the more notable boycott movements comes from “six Arab nations – United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Mauritania” – pushing for Qatar to be removed as the host of the World Cup. Fragmented boycott efforts, however, struggle, hence the dozens of organizations and publications working to persuade teams to pledge to not attend the games. Not only would a widespread boycott limit the success of Qatar’s hosting of the boycotts, but may also encourage FIFA to select future hosting locations with better human rights records.

### VI. Conclusions

To be clear, the situation is far from black and white. Plenty of scholars and analysts contend that the Western World’s response to Qatar’s hosting is hypocritical, arguing that clubs otherwise readily ignore human rights issues in their own countries and the countries of frequent opponents.

Nevertheless, FIFA and Qatar remain in the hot seat. Workers face oppressive conditions for slim wages while FIFA stands to reap a huge profit. There is a necessary balance between pressuring for reform and deterring future progress. International attention has now been turned to these issues, and efforts must continue to be made by Qatari officials to improve labor conditions for migrant workers.

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### References


