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# Activists Expand Labor and Human Rights Campaign Beyond Qatar to Include All Gulf States

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Human rights groups and trade unions have stepped up pressure on Qatar to reform its restrictive labour system and expanded their campaign to include all six wealthy members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

The activists hope that Qatar may move quicker on promised reforms given that the integrity of the Gulf state's successful 2022 World Cup bid has again been called into question as a result of world soccer body FIFA's four-year long corruption scandal.

They also hope that their increased pressure will benefit from the fact that multiple conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa may make other Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates more sensitive to criticism.

Virtually all members of the GCC -- Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Oman -- have begun to tinker with their labour laws and regulations as a result of the pressure on Qatar as well as publicity surrounding multiple cases of abuse of workers, including rape and beatings of domestic help. At the same time, they have stepped up crackdowns on domestic critics.

The UAE in response to criticism by human rights groups and trade unions has invested heavily in projecting itself as a forward looking, modern state and key US ally, America's Little Sparta in the Middle East and North Africa, in the words of Washington Post reporter Rajiv Chandrasekaran.

In a throwback to the days after the 9/11 Al Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington, Saudi Arabia is fending off charges that its investment of billions of dollars in the last three decades in the global spread of Wahhabism, the kingdom's puritan, inward-looking interpretation of Islam, is an important ideological and theological inspiration for jihadist groups like Islamic State, the group that controls a swath of Syria and Iraq.

In a statement as GCC labour ministers were meeting in Kuwait, 93 human rights groups and trade unions demanded the abolition of the region's kafala or sponsorship system that puts workers at the mercy of their employers; ratify and implement international labour and human rights standards; and engage with trade unions. The statement highlighted the plight of domestic workers, the most vulnerable group of foreign labour, because they often are not included in legal labour provisions.

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) charged in a report published this weekend that GCC governments rather than amending laws and regulations have sought to confront the issue by agreeing on regionally standardized employment contracts that in the unions' view "revealed serious defects." The ITUC said the Gulf states lacked the political will to enact meaningful reform.

The activists' stepped-up pressure is likely to be the heaviest on Qatar, the only GCC member that since its winning of its World Cup bid almost four years ago, has engaged with its critics. Unlike other Gulf states that bar entry to foreign activists and incarcerate their critics, Qatar has worked with the likes of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch to develop new standards. It has allowed them to investigate the conditions of foreign workers who constitute a majority of the population in several Gulf states and issue condemnatory reports at news conferences in Doha.

The statement, issued in advance of the Abu Dhabi Dialogue, a collaborative multilateral governmental effort to improve labour mobility in Asia, signals mounting exasperation among activists with Qatar's failure to put its money where its mouth is. Two major Qatari institutions, the Qatar Foundation and the 2022 Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy of the World Cup, have adopted in cooperation with human rights groups significantly improved labour standards. Qatar has however yet to adopt those standards nationally and ensure their implementation. The standards moreover fall far short of an abolition of kafala that among other things restricts a foreign worker's ability to freely travel or seek alternative employment.

The reference in the statement to increased engagement with trade unions further underlines growing impatience among activists. In contrast to Qatar's engagement with human rights group, its relationship with the ITUC has been troubled because of the group's more aggressive approach which amounted to a good cop-bad cop division of labour among activists. Human rights activists have conceded in the past that labour reform constitutes an existential issue for Qatar, a country in which the citizenry accounts for a mere 12 percent of the population and that the Gulf state as a result would need time to act. The call for increased engagement implies however a growing sense among activists four years after Qatar won its World Cup hosting rights that the good cop-bad cop strategy has failed to produce results.

The activists' expanded focus was evident in a series of recent reports on various Gulf states. It comes amid the inclusion of human and labour rights in contracts issued by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to future hosts of the Olympic Games and acknowledgement by FIFA that those rights should be part of its hosting criteria. Human rights groups and others like Transparency International are putting sports high on their agendas. Qatar and the UAE both have ambitions to host an Olympic Games.

The IOC's focus on human rights puts Qatar because of the World Cup in the firing line and could have a fallout for Bahrain and the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) that is headed by a member of the Bahraini ruling family as a result of allegations that senior Bahraini sports officials have been involved in the repression of athletes who allegedly participated in anti-government protests in recent years. Restriction of women's sporting rights has also positioned Saudi Arabia and Iran, the GCC's nemesis in the struggle for regional power, centre stage in the efforts of international sports associations to achieve some modicum of adherence to human rights.

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty have both in the last month targeted the UAE, already under fire for the conditions of foreign workers constructing facilities in Abu Dhabi for the Guggenheim Museum and New York University and in advance of Dubai's hosting of the 2020 Expo. A Human Rights Watch report in late October focusing on conditions of domestic workers said the situation in the UAE was symptomatic for the region.

The UAE's sponsorship system "chains domestic workers to their employers and then leaves them isolated and at risk of abuse behind the closed doors of private homes. With no labour law protections for domestic workers, employers can, and many do, overwork, underpay, and abuse these women," said Rothna Begum, the group's researcher. Rather than engaging, the UAE, Human Rights Watch said, reacted with "the usual complacency," It accused the group of "sensationalist reporting."

Amnesty, in a report entitled "There is no freedom here, Silencing dissent in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)," charged last week that beneath "the glitz, the gloss and the glamour of the façade that the UAE's rulers present to the world there is a much uglier reality where activists who dare to challenge the authorities or speak out in favour of greater democracy and government accountability are thrown into jail. There, they are cut off from the outside world for months at a time before they are tried and sentenced to long prison terms by courts that do little more than rubber stamp the decisions of the UAE executive."

Far-reaching changes in its labour regim in response to the stepped up pressure could make Qatar a driver of change in a region that leaves no stone unturned in its effort to maintain the status quo and ring fence itself against the Middle East and North Africa's clamour for change.

Qatar is because of the World Cup the Gulf state and multi-faceted soft power strategy most vulnerable to external pressure. Reforms it enacts will inevitably ripple throughout the Gulf. As a result, Qatar, already at odds with Saudi Arabia and the UAE because of its support for Islamists including the Muslim Brotherhood, could despite being an autocracy emerge in more than one way as a reluctant and perhaps unwitting catalyst of rather than a bulwark against some degree of change.

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