



The 2022 FIFA World Cup and Human Rights Abuse in Qatar

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Abstract

One of the few characteristics that everybody in the world shares is the fact that all humans have certain basic rights that they enjoy. These rights are known as Human Rights. An aftermath of the second world war was the formation of the United Nations, which was an intergovernmental organization created with the aim of maintaining international peace and security. Many atrocities such as the Holocaust, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the war crimes committed by Japan in East Asia had resulted in talks about having some basic laws that protected the people of the world regardless of who they were and where they were from. These rights were adopted in the form of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was passed by the UN General Assembly in 1948. Ever since then many conventions and treaties related to the protection of human rights have been passed, but the abuse of human rights is such a pervasive issue that true regulation of human rights is nearly impossible.

The Federation International de Football Association or FIFA as it is commonly known, is an international body that governs the sport of association football. However, over the past decade, there have been growing accusations of corruption within FIFA, which have been proven by various investigations into the workings of FIFA, resulting in the resignation of then-President Sepp Blatter. These allegations were with regards to Russia and Qatar being selected as the hosts of the 2018 and 2022 World Cups respectively. Considered by players and fans alike to be the pinnacle of football, the FIFA World Cup is the most prestigious football tournament in the world.

Despite this prestigious reputation and storied history, the 2022 FIFA World Cup has been heavily criticized by fans, players, and international organizations alike, and all of this is before the tournament has even started. The various accusations of corruption have brought to light the fact that the Qatari government bribed FIFA officials to vote in favor of conducting the tournament in Qatar, and their bid to host the 2022 World Cup was accepted. However, since Qatar is not a traditionally football-playing nation, infrastructure such as stadiums

and player accommodation had to be built. For the past several years, the Qatari government has overseen the construction of football stadiums to host the tournament. However, since this construction began in 2013, various international watchdogs and journalists have accused Qatar of human rights abuse for this construction. This paper delves into these allegations and sees whether there is any truth to them.

FIFA and Corruption

Money runs the world. At the end of the day, the sports industry is a business, and as with all businesses, the ultimate goal of teams and athletes is to make money. Sports such as Formula One, Basketball, and Cricket, are extremely lucrative due to the number of people that watch them, making the broadcasts of these sports the perfect place for marketers to advertise various products and services. Football is no different, as it is the most watched sport in the world. Players such as Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo are amongst the richest athletes in the world, and many football teams are owned by billionaire businessmen who view these teams as investment opportunities rather than passion projects, which used to be the case before the 1990s. As with any multi-billion-dollar industry, football has its fair share of sketchy deals and unethical practices. Some teams in the English Premier League such as Everton and Chelsea are owned by Russian oligarchs with connections to the Russian Mafia and Vladimir Putin, while others such as Southampton are owned by Chinese betting and gambling companies that are thought to be money laundering fronts for the Triads, which are Chinese organized crime groups¹.

FIFA is no different in this regard. Along with being the governing body and growing football's popularity, one of FIFA's main jobs is to advocate for integrity and fair play in football. This refers to both fair play in terms of players following rules, and also to Financial Fair Play, which is meant to ensure that football clubs don't spend excessive amounts of money to get better players and to maintain equality amongst football club in terms of spending². Despite this, there have been many allegations about FIFA officials being open to corruption and bribery. As with the Olympics, countries submit their bids to be chosen as the hosts of the FIFA World Cup, and FIFA officials vote on which country they think should host the tournament. Many whistleblowers have come forward and said that FIFA officials have accepted millions of dollars in bribes to vote for specific countries as hosts. One such whistleblower was Phaedra Al-Majid, a minor Qatari royal and a part of Qatar's bidding team. She has claimed that Qatari government officials gave bribes of \$1.5 million each to various FIFA members to vote for Qatar³. These allegations were revealed to be true in 2015⁴, and many believed that Qatar would be removed as hosts, but this has not happened.

¹ The Premier League and Organized Crime, David Ornstein, The Athletic, March 15th 2021

² Manchester City and the Death of FFP, Michael Moore, The Guardian, 28th August 2019

³ Whistleblower Claims Qatar Government Bribed FIFA Officials, Richard Conway, BBC News, 10th July 2011

⁴ 9 FIFA Officials Arrested in New York, Bryan Graham, The Guardian, 27th May 2015

Qatar and Human Rights

The State of Qatar is a small nation in the Middle East, occupying a small part of the Arabian Peninsula. Surrounded by the Persian Gulf on three sides, Qatar, like many countries in the Gulf, is a constitutional monarchy, ruled by the Emir of Qatar, Tamim Bin Hamad. Despite being small in terms of size, Qatar wields considerable influence in the Middle East, and throughout the world, because of the work of their state-owned media group Al Jazeera and their work during the Arab Spring⁵. Qatar is an Islamic nation, as a result of which it follows Sharia Law⁶, which applies to laws that deal with inheritance, family law, and some criminal acts. Because of the application of Sharia Law, some crimes such as adultery and alcohol consumption carry the punishment of flogging and stoning. Qatar is a signatory to the UN Convention Against Torture, and has been implored by the UN Committee Against Torture to change these laws⁷.

However, there is a lot more to the allegations of Human Rights abuse in Qatar. The UDHR in Article 4 specifically mentions that slavery in all forms is banned⁸, slavery is still practiced in many places throughout the world in some form or the other. This is termed as modern slavery. According to Dr. Kevin Bales, founder of the NGO Free the Slaves, modern slavery occurs “when a person is under the control of another person who applies violence and force to maintain that control, and the goal of that control is exploitation.”⁹ According to the US Department of State and many international organizations, Qatar is a country where modern slavery is practiced.

Like many Gulf nations, Qatar follows the Kafala System, where people who want to migrate to these countries get their visas and legal status through a sponsor or Kafala, usually their employer¹⁰. Many Asians migrate to Qatar to work as semi-skilled labourers under this law, but as the Kafala or employer has so much power over these workers, they are subjected to terrible working conditions, have payments withheld, are beaten if they work slowly, and are forced to do work that they have not signed up for, which the NGO Human Rights Watch has deemed to be exploitative and equivalent to modern slavery¹¹.

Human Rights Abuse in Relation to the 2022 World Cup

As mentioned before, most construction workers in Qatar are migrants from South-East Asia who have migrated to Qatar under the Kafala system. Under this system, the Kafala, or sponsor, is held responsible for the actions and behavior of these workers, as a result of which these workers are given visas and rights as migrants in Qatar through their employers. Because of this, these workers usually hand their passports to their sponsors and are not allowed to leave their job or leave Qatar unless they are given permission to do so by their

⁵ Tiny Kingdom's Huge Role in Libya is a Cause for Concern, Sam Dagher, Wall Street Journal, October 17th 2011

⁶ The Permanent Constitution of the State of Qatar.

⁷ Conclusions and Recommendations: Qatar, UN Committee Against Torture, 25th July 2006

⁸ Article 4, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, United Nations

⁹ Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy, Dr. Kevin Bales, University of California Press, 2012

¹⁰ The Middle East's Migrant Workers: Forget About Rights, Philip Brooks, The Economist, 10th August, 2013

¹¹ Qatar: Migrant Workers Face Abuse, Human Rights Watch, 12th July 2012

employer¹². Since Qatar is not a historically football-playing nation, hosting the 2022 World Cup meant that they needed to construct seven international standard football stadiums. Every worker employed to construct these stadiums are in Qatar under the Kafala system¹³.

Many reports have emerged stating that the migrants who have been working on these construction sites are treated extremely poorly, with many workers being threatened to sign papers allowing employers to withhold wages until the construction is completed, and being kept in extremely small living spaces, while working tirelessly without breaks and being whipped or beaten if they do not work at the required pace¹⁴. Sharan Burrows of the International Trade Union Conglomerate visited a labor camp which accommodated these construction workers, and stated that the workers were “basically slaves” and were being “seriously exploited”¹⁵. The government of Qatar promised to make changes to improve the conditions of these workers, but no such change has been seen.

In 2013, investigative journalists with The Guardian infiltrated these labor camps and found that the situation in the camps has worsened. Workers had not been paid at all for their work, with their salaries and passports and worker identification cards being withheld by employers, and they were forced to live in dilapidated and unsanitary camps without access to amenities such as hospitals or running water, and had to beg for food¹⁶. The Guardian stated that the condition of these workers qualified under the ILO’s definition of modern slavery. Things changed in 2020, as workers were given all of their withheld money, and were given proper quarantine measures and treatment for Covid-19 if they contracted it, and were also provided with vaccinations.

Conclusion

Human Rights are perhaps the most important rights that a person has, as they are universally applicable. The protection of human rights is considered extremely important, and various international bodies and organizations have been created with this basic goal in mind. One of the many human rights that is protected under UDHR is the right against enslavement. Despite this, many examples of slavery exist to this day as modern slavery. One of the most prominent examples of this is the Kafala system in Gulf countries, under which migrant workers are allowed to enter the country only if they are sponsored by a citizen, usually their employer, and they are given their visas through these sponsors. Because these sponsors are held responsible for the behavior of these migrants, they usually seize these workers’ passports, and have complete control over what they do or don’t do, which usually results in the exploitation of these workers.

One of the countries where the Kafala system is practiced is the State of Qatar. A small country in the north of the Arabian Peninsula, Qatar is a nation with a considerable amount of influence, especially after the Arab Spring. As a result of this growing influence, Qatar was able to submit successful bids to host the 2022 FIFA

¹² World Cup Hosts Come Under Scrutiny Over “Slavery” Accusations, James Montague, CNN, May 1st 2013

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Report on the Rights of Migrant Workers in Qatar, Amnesty International, 2014

¹⁵ ITUC Report on Qatar Migrant Labour Crisis, Sharan Burrows, ITUC, August 27th 2013

¹⁶ Qatar’s World Cup “Slaves”, Pete Pattison, The Guardian, September 1st, 2013

World Cup, along with the 2030 Asian Games. However, Qatar holding the 2022 World Cup has come under a lot of criticism, after many allegations and reports arising that the Qatar World Cup Committee bribed FIFA officials to vote for their bid. Qatar was confirmed as the host nation, however, and there was even more criticism regarding their treatment of migrant labourers who have been working on the construction of their stadiums, with payment being withheld, terrible living conditions, and workers being verbally and physically abused.

I am of the opinion that there should have been a crackdown on Qatar for these immoral and unethical practices. Various reports by organizations such as Amnesty International and IUTS, and reputed news agencies such as the Guardian, basically said that Qatar was practicing slavery, but there was no international outcry regarding this. Players and fans protested against conducting the World Cup in Qatar, but no countries or football associations expressed any sort of discontent towards this. FIFA, which is tasked with maintaining the sport's integrity, were essentially apathetic to fan concern regarding Qatar's treatment of workers, and faced no backlash for allowing Qatar's bid to go through. I think that there should be sanctions by the United Nations against Qatar, and transparency in the inner workings of FIFA, to prevent such incidents.

