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Global Sporting Events: Battlegrounds for Human Rights

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

With the London Olympics less than two months away major global sporting events are increasingly proving to be Middle Eastern battlegrounds for human rights rather than an expensive way for countries to boost their prestige and sense of national pride.

Commentary

Flashy, high-profile events in the Middle East like the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, Formula-1 in Bahrain and Abu Dhabi and tennis championships in Dubai have become leverage points in the hands of international and local activists and flashpoints of protest against autocratic regimes.

To detractors of Gulf Arab regimes the tournaments are symbols of an effort to retain power in part by squandering resources to pacify people with glittering totems of unbalanced and often misconceived development as well as games. That perception is reinforced by a sense that major economic benefactors of sporting events are often members of the host's ruling family.

Currently the British Foreign Office is struggling whether to allow a Syrian general close to embattled President Bashar al-Assad to attend the Olympics. General Mowaffak Joumaa, head of Syria's Olympic committee, has signaled his intention to be present in London in contrast to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who said he was not coming because Britain had an undisclosed "problem" with his presence. The general sees his attendance as a way to project the Assad regime as an accepted member of the international community despite widespread condemnation of its brutal crackdown on anti-government protesters and rebels.

Anti-government protests foiled a Bahraini attempt earlier this year to use Formula-1 to portray the country as stable and harmonious following last year's hard-handed suppression of anti-government demonstrations. The attempt backfired. Rather than focusing on happenings on the race track, international attention turned instead to continued discontent and the government's failure to move ahead with meaningful political and economic reforms demanded by the Shiite Muslim majority of the ruling Sunni minority.

Meanwhile, Gulf states are feeling the heat of the labour movement to change foreign workers' conditions, widely denounced as modern day slavery, as a result of Qatar's winning of the right to host the 2022 World Cup.

Confronting existential fears

Union pressure to change the labour system cuts to the core of the nature of Gulf societies, whose dependence on foreign labour has turned the local citizenry into a minority in countries like Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. Beyond the commercial and economic advantages of a cheap pool of labour, discussion of any kind of rights for non-locals raises the spectre of minority Gulf populations no longer having countries that they control.

Gulf states are nonetheless seeking to avoid confrontation with the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), which represents 175 million workers in 153 countries. The ITUC is threatening Qatar with a boycott campaign of the 2022 World Cup if it fails to bring the conditions of up to one million primarily Asian workers engaged in construction of stadiums and other huge infrastructure projects in line with international standards. Qatar's Labour Minister Nassir bin Abdulla Alhumidi agreed recently to meet the ITUC for the first time at the International Labour Organisation conference next month.

Saudi Arabia has followed Qatar in announcing that it was looking to replace employer sponsorship of workers with a licensing system. Qatari Labour Undersecretary Hussein Al-Mulla said earlier this month that the energy-rich Gulf state would form "an elected and independent workers' union to protect workers' rights regardless of their nationality."

However the moves by the Gulf states amount to too little too late. They have failed to appease the ITUC and have put world soccer body FIFA on the spot because it does not want to be seen as endorsing the staging of the world's largest sporting event on the back of perceived slavery and violations of human rights. Until Qatar's agreement to meet the ITUC next month governments in the Gulf had refused to engage in a dialogue with the trade unions and other interest groups who are using the staging of major global sporting events to push for changes that would bring the region into line with accepted international practice.

They also seek to underwrite the calls for social justice echoing across North Africa and West Asia from the Atlantic coast to the Gulf that have been in revolt since December 2010. As a result, trade unions are moving ahead with plans for a global campaign under the motto 'No World Cup in Qatar without labour rights', to deprive Qatar of its right to host the 2022 World Cup if it failed to align its labour legislation and workers' condition with international standards.

It was not immediately clear whether Al Mulla's announcement went further than his proposal in early May to establish a Qatari-led labour committee that would represent workers' interests rather than a union able to engage in collective bargaining; he had also proposed abolition of the sponsorship system that would stop short of allowing foreign workers to freely change jobs.

Battle for labour rights

The unions' sense of urgency stems from the death last year of some 200 Nepalese workers, allegedly as the result of harsh working conditions as well as the fact that companies are developing their supply chains and costing models for major infrastructure projects on the basis of what they describe as unacceptable labour terms.

The battle for labour rights is one that could significantly alter the paradigm on which international sporting bodies like FIFA and the International Olympic Committee award hosting rights. A successful campaign for labour rights would force such bodies to take workers' conditions and by extension, adherence to human rights, into account in the awarding of future tournaments. Qatar learnt the price of reputational risk this week when the International Olympic Committee rejected its bid for the 2020 Olympics.

The campaign could also spark long overdue debate over the unsustainable demographic structure of wealthy Gulf states that are home to generations of Gulf-born descendants of immigrants with no rights, no secure prospects and no real stake in the countries of their birth. As their number continues to increase, educated and prosperous Gulf-born expatriates are beginning to demand that they be given equal rights and caution that they no longer can be bought off with cushy tax-free incomes and benefits.

The scion of a wealthy South Asian family in the Gulf, when asked whether he minded that his Gulf born children would grow up with no rights and no security, responded: "Absolutely, that is no longer acceptable. Gulf societies will have to change by hook or by crook."

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