



The Sponsorship System in Qatar: Challenges and Implications

by *Jamal Abdullah*

Small steps amid international scrutiny set Qatar up for true labor regulation and reform

In May 2014, Qatar officially announced its intention to replace the long-established sponsorship system. A new system will presumably give expatriate workers more flexibility when it comes to changing jobs, as well as moving in and out of Qatar with fewer constraints.

The announcement was made during a press conference which included Qatar's Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs on 14 May 2014.

Mohammed Ahmed Al-Ateeq, Assistant Director

of the General Directorate of Borders Passports and Expatriates Affairs, announced that the cabinet gave preliminary approval to the newly proposed law, annulling the current system and replacing it with a modified version. The new version includes additional core reforms to the labor law, all of which are aimed especially at protecting the rights of foreign workers.

Al-Ateeq noted that the amendments were sent to the Qatar Chamber of Commerce and the Consultative Assembly of Qatar for deliberations, before being decreed in its final form by the cabinet. According to the new amendments, expatriate workers will no longer need to directly ask their sponsor for an exit permit. The new simplified system requires the worker to apply through a designated online portal set up by the Ministry of Interior. The worker will then be granted automatic permission to leave the country after a 72-hour grace period.

Currently, workers are prohibited from returning to Qatar for two years after their contracts end. The new system eliminates this clause, and additionally holds the employee solely responsible for his financial obligations—with no responsibilities for the sponsor to bear.

Another advantage in the new law is the flexibility afforded to employees to move between jobs upon the end of their contract. Employees are no longer required to obtain a 'No Objection Certificate' from their sponsor, and can move to another job once their fixed-term employment contract ends. If their employment term has no fixed duration, employees can move to another job after five years have passed since the start of their employment contract.

The new labor law places a strict fine against employers who withhold employees' passports.

The fine can reach up to ~\$14,000 (QR 50,000) per passport.

Moreover, the government is in the process of establishing a new system for protecting laborers' income. The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, in association with the Bank of Qatar and the Ministry of Finance were instructed by the Qatari cabinet to establish a comprehensive portal handled by the Bank of Qatar, in association with the ministries, which will liaise with local banks and companies.

With the new income protection system, all salaries of laborers must be transferred into their bank accounts via the new portal. This way, any violations can be monitored and measures can be taken against violators.

This system includes all expatriate labor, including domestic workers. Once the new law is decreed by the cabinet, employers will be given a grace period to resolve any violations before fines become applicable.

Core reforms

These are core reform measures to the labor law in one of the Gulf Cooperation Council states, all of which still utilize the sponsorship system which continues to receive criticism globally, whether from governments or non-governmental organizations concerned with human and labor rights.

These reform measures announced in May 2014 aim to enhance living conditions of expat labor in Qatar, most of whom are employed in construction and infrastructure projects in order to achieve the vision of Qatar 2030; and to complete the necessary construction for hosting the World Cup 2022.

The government also announced plans to provide hired labor with adequate housing, in accordance with international living standards.

To ensure the success of these plans, Qatar intends to recruit 300 inspectors to monitor employers and report any violations. This serious step is taken to further ensure that the plans are actualized within the timeframe set by the cabinet,

A new system will presumably give expatriate workers more flexibility when it comes to changing jobs, as well as moving in and out of Qatar with fewer constraints.

since the lenience in monitoring and enforcing the law could have been the reason for violations from employers against some expat laborers.

These measures are setting Qatar on the right track for true reform, especially amid foreign media campaigns condemning living conditions of laborers in Qatar, namely in French, British and American media outlets.

The aforementioned measures are, in fact, a victory to the genuine reform agenda which Qatar has been working on for the past two decades. It is also a victory for human rights organizations working across the world to improve the living conditions of laborers and to safeguard their rights.

Dr. Jamal Abdullah is the Head of the Gulf Studies Unit at the Aljazeera Centre for Studies.