

## Qatar

Qatar has the highest ratio of migrants to citizens in the world, with only 225,000 citizens in a population of 1.7 million. Yet the country has some of the most restrictive sponsorship laws in the Persian Gulf region, leaving migrant workers vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Forced labor and human trafficking remain serious problems.

While the constitution protects freedom of expression “in accordance with the conditions and circumstances set forth in the law,” in practice Qatar restricts freedom of speech and the press. Local media tend to self-censor, and the law permits criminal penalties, including jail terms, for defamation.

Qatar currently holds a seat on the United Nations Human Rights Council, winning an election to its second consecutive term in May 2010. In June the government voted to adopt the International Labour Organization’s Convention on Decent Work for Domestic Workers, which establishes the first global labor standards on domestic work.

### Migrant Workers

More than 1.2 million migrant workers—mostly from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Nepal, and Bangladesh—live and work in Qatar. The largest sector, construction, employs 506,000 migrants.

Law 14 of 2004—governing labor in the private sector—limits working hours, requires paid annual leave, sets requirements on health and safety, and requires on-time wages each month. Neither the law nor supporting legislation set a minimum wage. The law allows Qatari workers to form unions, and permits strikes with prior government approval. Migrant workers have no right to unionize or strike, though they make up 99 percent of the private sector workforce.

The labor law excludes approximately 132,000 migrant domestic workers. While the Advisory Council, a 35-member appointed legislative body, approved a separate law covering domestic work in 2010, at this writing the law awaited the approval of Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani.

Migrant workers reported extensive labor law violations. Common complaints included late or unpaid wages and employers' failure to procure work permits that proved workers' legal residence in the country. Many workers said they received false information about their jobs and salaries before arriving and signed contracts in Qatar under coercive circumstances. Some lived in overcrowded and unsanitary labor camps, and lacked access to potable water.

Qatar employs only 150 labor inspectors to monitor compliance with the labor law, and inspections do not include worker interviews.

A major barrier to redressing labor abuses is the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, which ties a migrant worker's legal residence to his or her employer, or "sponsor." Migrant workers cannot change jobs without their sponsoring employer's consent, except in exceptional cases with permission from the Interior Ministry. If a worker leaves his or her sponsoring employer, even if fleeing abuse, the employer can report the worker as "absconding," leading to detention and deportation. In order to leave Qatar, migrants must obtain an exit visa from their sponsor, and some said sponsors denied them these visas. Workers widely reported that sponsors confiscated their passports, in violation of the Sponsorship Law.

In October 2011 Qatar passed new legislation to combat human trafficking, using the definition of trafficking provided in the UN Trafficking Protocol. Those who commit offenses specified in the law could face up to fifteen years in prison.

## **Statelessness**

Between 1,200 and 1,500 stateless Bidun, who claim they have a right to Qatari citizenship, live in Qatar. The 2005 Nationality Law allows individuals to apply for citizenship after living in Qatar for 25 years, but limits naturalization to only 50 people per year. Bidun cannot register for education or health benefits, or legally hold employment. The government does not register the birth of Bidun children.

In 2004 and 2005 the government stripped more than 5,000 Qataris from the al-Murra tribe of citizenship as delayed punishment for some members' participation in a 1996 coup attempt against the current emir. In 2006 the Qatari government officially reinstated the citizenship of most of this group, but an estimated 200 remain stateless. They cannot legally work in the country and report economic hardship.

## **Women's Rights**

Both women and men vote in municipal elections, though representatives have limited power. Qatari women do not have the same rights as Qatari men to obtain nationality for their spouses and children. In 2010 Qatar appointed its first female judge.

Qatar has no law specifically criminalizing domestic violence, and the government currently publishes no data on incidents of domestic violence. Representatives of the Qatar Foundation for the Protection of Women and Children, a government-funded charitable institution, told local media that domestic violence continued to be a problem, based on their work with women and children who sought assistance.

Qatar adjudicates family law and personal status matters in religious courts in which judges base rulings on their interpretations of Islamic law. People have no option to seek adjudication pursuant to a civil code. Family law as generally interpreted discriminates against women in matters of divorce, inheritance, and child custody, granting men privileged status in these matters.

## **Freedom of Expression**

On March 2, plainclothes individuals believed to be state security agents took into custody Sultan al-Khalaifi, a Qatari blogger and former secretary general of Alkarama, a Geneva-based NGO monitoring human rights in the Arab world. They searched his home for two hours and confiscated possessions, including al-Khalaifi's laptop. Authorities released him a month later without charge.

In June Qatar's Advisory Council approved a new media law that allows for criminal penalties against journalists who write critically on "friendly countries" or matters pertaining to national security, but arrests require a court order. The emir had not approved the law at this writing. Under the media law still in effect, journalists may be arrested without a court order. In April police arrested two Swiss sports journalists for Radio Television Suisse (RTS) and interrogated them for several hours. The journalists had been filming a segment on soccer (football) in Qatar after the country won its bid to host the 2022 soccer World Cup. An RTS statement said a judge ordered them to pay a fine, and that authorities prevented them from leaving the country for 13 days.

Al Jazeera, the international news agency broadcasting in both Arabic and English, is headquartered in Doha, the capital, and funded by the Qatari government. While the

station covers regional and international news, and played an important role in reporting the pro-democracy Arab Spring movements, few stories report on Qatar.

### **Key International Actors**

On December 2, 2010, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association selected Qatar to host the 2022 World Cup. Qatar's winning bid included commitments to build nine new stadiums, a new airport, metro and rail systems, a bridge to Bahrain, 54 team base camps, and significant new hotel stock, at a total estimated cost of US\$80 to 100 billion. Local media estimated that these projects would require recruitment of hundreds of thousands of new workers from abroad.

In March Qatar was among the first countries to recognize Libya's National Transitional Council, and was the first Arab country to contribute to NATO's enforcement of a no-fly zone over Libya. On June 2 the Qatari government forcibly returned to eastern Libya Eman al-'Obeidi, a refugee recognized by UN high commissioner for refugees, who said that forces loyal to the government headed by Muammar Gaddafi gang-raped her in Tripoli.