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Qatar and the World Cup: a moment for the international advocacy groups to challenge the Kafala system.

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1. Introduction

Qatar is a major high-level sports events organizer, and the awarding of the 2022 World Cup on 2 December 2010 by FIFA is only the last of a long series of mega-sporting events hosted in the country. In recent decades, Doha has been the fulcrum of many different sports events, ranging from MotoGP to ATP tennis, from Master's golf to Formula 3000 and the 2006 Doha Asian Games. The latter event has been hailed as one of the most successful and well-organized examples of a mega-sporting event (Adham, 2008, pp. 242-43).

The driving forces behind Qatar's focus on sports events are several. The will to diversify the economy from hydrocarbon sources is one of the main reasons, plainly stated in Qatar National Vision 2030 (QNV, 2008). In this regard, the massive investments and the infrastructure built for this type of event can be leveraged to diversify the economy. While being instrumentalized in promoting a new brand image of Qatar worldwide, these sports events are important catalysts to attract foreign investments and tourism within a climate of intense competition among the GCC countries regarding these latter aspects (Adham, 2008, p. 245; Ziadah, 2018). Moreover, hosting the World Cup can potentially be a strong instrument of sport washing, namely a term coined in 2015 that describes the strategy used by governments to mobilize sport as a platform to grandstand and convey a brand-new image of themselves, diverting attention from their tainted reputation or their bad human right record, as in the case of the authoritarian regimes (Ganji, 2022). Sport washing can be carried out through the acquisition of sports teams (i.e., the Qatar Investment Authority – Qatar's sovereign wealth fund - bought the French Paris Saint-Germain football team in 2012, whereas Saudi Arabia took over the British Newcastle football team in 2020) or through hosting major sports events, as the case of the 2022 World Cup. However, Qatar is not the first authoritarian country to hold such an event to divert attention from political or social issues. In fact, there is a historical record of authoritarian regimes holding this major sport event: in 1934, the World Cup was held in Italy, in 1978 in Argentina, and in 2018 in Russia.

Awarding the 2022 World Cup edition to Qatar has prompted an unprecedented international campaign by INGOs and international media to denounce the abuses against labor migrants in Qatar who work under what has become known as the Kafala regime. Although not a monolithic entity, Kafala can be described as the migration governance regime used in the GCC countries, Lebanon and Jordan. It is a sponsorship system whereby every migrant, to work in the country, has to be sponsored/tied by a company or citizen of the country, which becomes the legal guarantor of the migrant for the whole duration of the stay. This system gave way to many kinds of misconduct and abuses, such as appalling working conditions, passport confiscations, wage thefts, and prohibitions of changing jobs or leaving the country without the employer's approval.

Qatar has always been, historically, a country that relied heavily on foreign labor to satisfy its economy's needs. In fact, since its independence in 1971, the Qatari population has increasingly been a minority in the country. The massive influx of construction workers, especially from the Indian subcontinent, furthered by the World Cup award because of the massive investments and need of construction workers to build adequate infrastructure for the event, has exacerbated this trend (De Bel-Air, 2014, pp. 5-6; Hanieh in Khalaf et al., 2015, p. 223). The FIFA World Cup, widely regarded as one of the most significant global sporting events, possesses the potential to bring forth a significant legacy concerning human rights violations in host countries (Ganji, 2016, p. 237). By capturing the attention of the entire world, attracting international scrutiny, and exerting pressure on these nations, the tournament can serve as a powerful catalyst for addressing and rectifying such violations. In this regard, Gianni Infantino, FIFA president since 2016, stated in October 2022, a few weeks before the kick-off of the World Cup in Qatar, that this event has helped improve workers' rights in the country (FIFA, 2022). Indeed, the international attention garnered following the selection of Qatar as the host for the 2010 World Cup was instrumental in instigating significant legislative reforms concerning workers' rights and migration within the country in the years preceding the event (IMF, 2022, p.9), such as the introduction of a minimum wage, the prohibition of passports confiscation to labor migrants, and the removal of the employer's approval for migrants to change job and exit the country (Keita et al., 2022, p.7). This outcome can be attributed to the collaborative endeavors of civil society, activists, international trade unions, the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the attention from the international media. Due to the absence of a common framework for international migration governance and the prohibition of trade unions in Qatar, these entities played a crucial role in advocating for reforms, particularly within the construction sector, which faced extensive public scrutiny in the lead-up to the World Cup. As stated by the ILO, TUC, and the global union federation BWI, during the run-up to the 2022 World Cup, the transnational advocacy groups played a major role by bringing forward international pressure against Qatar and promoting a reforming agenda, eventually resulting, in 2018, in the Technical Cooperation Programme between the ILO and Qatar that delivered sweeping reforms in the Qatari labor laws (ILO 2022, pp. 2-3; BWI, n.a.; TUC, 2022). However, extensive reformative changes are not the only possible outcome in this type of scenario. For example, the international advocacy campaign for human rights during the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing showed how international pressure may not lead to any significant reform (Brownell, 2012). Moreover, as detailed in the literature review, before the scrutiny and reforming momentum due to the 2022 World Cup, numerous scholars have regarded the Kafala system as a sponsorship system that posed significant challenges to its reform or eradication, owing to a multitude of reasons.

In light of these considerations, the thesis is driven by the following research question: why were human rights organizations and campaigns able to push Qatar to undertake comprehensive reform to its migration sponsorship system and labor laws? To understand why Qatar was vulnerable to the twelve-year

advocacy campaigns carried by international NGOs since the awarding of the 2022 World Cup bid in 2010, the thesis will develop as follows: it starts with the literature review about the Kafala system, the object of international pressure; then, the theories and methods used to carry out the research are presented; after that, the first chapter provides a context of analysis by describing the characteristics of the economy and the labor market in Qatar, as well as the sponsorship system, its engendered abuses on migrant workers, the reaction of the transnational advocacy network in the aftermath of the awarding bid in 2010, and the reforms promoted during the technical cooperation between Qatar and the ILO; subsequently, the second chapter describes the recruitment process of the migrant workers and the migration governance that manages the flux of migrants workers from South and Southeast Asia to the Gulf, shedding light both on the role played by NGOs in this framework and their advocacy work in practice; finally, the last chapter, after having briefly introduced the neoliberal project in Qatar, analyzes why Qatar, in the face of the reputational risks, was willing to host the World Cup, and why the advocacy campaign has been effective in prompting a policy change in the country, with some analytical considerations about the changes that these reform have brought; at the end of the thesis, the conclusion will be drawn.

My argument is the following: The state of Qatar, being driven by its neoliberal project, exposed itself to international pressure regarding human rights abuses during the preparations for the World Cup. By aspiring to establish itself as a significant global player, Qatar recognized the necessity of upholding human rights to gain credibility and acceptance from the international community. This compelled the Qatari state to embark on a reform process and address the concerns raised, recognizing the importance of aligning with international labor standards and human rights to solidify its position internationally, shape public opinion and global perceptions, and continue to attract foreign investments.

Relevance of Research

The relevance of the research revolves around analyzing the impact that international pressure can have on a non-democratic rentier state. Within the academic debate, the case of Qatar and the World Cup is one of the most illustrative case studies regarding the potential and limits of reputational pressures at the international level. It can provide further insights into the kind of influence INGOs can apply to these countries' migration and labor policies.

2. Literature review

Despite scholars acknowledging the challenges associated with reforming or eradicating the Kafala system, Qatar took significant steps toward reforming its labor and migration laws between 2018 and 2020. This chain of events raised my thesis research question of what motivated Qatar's commitment to reform and its engagement with the International Labour Organization (ILO) and other labor and human rights campaigns.

Thus, this literature review delves into the Kafala system, providing context and background of the sponsorship system in place in the GCC countries, describing why the scholars thought it is hard to eradicate, and discussing the different interpretations of the issue provided by the academic literature. The neoliberal trend in the GCC, which emerged in the early 2000s, will also be discussed as a crucial factor that contributes to the aforementioned puzzle and aids in its explanation.

The Kafala System

Kafala is the system of migration governance applied in the GCC countries, Lebanon, and Jordan. This mechanism establishes the relationship between foreign workers and their local sponsors (Kafeel). Although the Kafala system is not a monolithic entity, according to Khalaf (2015), it can be generally described as a system that binds the migrant to a local sponsor/employer (private company or citizen), who guarantees that the foreigner has the requirements to reside and work in the country. In fact, one distinctive feature of the Kafala system is that the responsibility for monitoring and surveilling migrant workers, including their adherence to labor and migration laws, is delegated from the state to the sponsor. Under this system, sponsors oversee the activities and compliance of migrant workers with local labor and migration laws. This outsourcing of surveillance places a significant level of authority in the hands of sponsors. However, other important security tasks, such as visa processing, security checks, exit protocols, and policing, are still a prerogative of the government. As explained by Kakande (2015), the foreigner is bound to the sponsor and the job provided by the latter, thereby not allowing free competition in the job market. Every migrant worker can get access in Qatar only with a job contract, and they are tied to it; they cannot change it at will unless they obtain a NOC (Non-Objection Certificate) from their employer. Even in workplace abuse cases, the workers cannot change their job without the NOC. If so, the workers would be denounced by their employer and registered as "absconders," a criminal charge in Qatar that provides for incarceration and deportation. Moreover, the migrants need their sponsor's approval even to obtain an exit permit. The sponsor has absolute power over the migrant in terms of job and movement within and outside the country. Because of this unbalanced relationship between employer and employee, the demeaning working conditions, and the

abuses the migrants have been enduring, the Kafala system has been referred to as a form of modern-day slavery.

The historical trajectory

Al-Shebabi (2019) provides an overview of the origins of the Kafala system and identifies the system's roots within the British colonization period in the Trucial States. The system was an attempt to regulate, in the early 1920s, the immigration of pearling divers who came from without the Gulf; the system was then updated in the 1930s, whereby the British Authorities established that every person seeking a job had to obtain a No Objection Certificate (NOC), a legal document stating that there were no issues regarding the activity the individual would undertake in the country, with the British authorities as the sponsors in those days. In another of his articles, Al-Shebabi (2015) summarizes the different migration phases of the Gulf. The first phase, from 1930 to 1973, corresponds to the first oil boom. In this period, the oil industry, driven by US and UK international oil companies, was built up. The labor required to develop this industry was mainly imported from other Arab countries. The second phase corresponds to the second oil boom, from 1973 to 1985, which was spurred by the two oil crises in the 70s that gave the local Gulf rulers control of the oil wealth and led to the foundation of petro-modernist states (i.e. states that pursued modernization through the oil wealth). As Al-Shebabi (ibid.) described, this wealth was used to build a modern state infrastructure. The required labor force to accomplish the endeavor was not extracted from the natives because a) their number was too small to satisfy the demand, b) it was not desirable to put locals with labor rights under the dictate of the capital, and c) their political consciousness. The result was that non-Arab (South Asian) labor increased in those years, changing the previous pattern that witnessed mainly the importation of Arab labor in the preceding decades. Khalaf emphasized this phenomenon (2015) when he noted that Arab migrants in the region – more than one million in the early 1970s - fell from 72% in 1975 to 56% in 1985 and further to 25/29% in 2002. This trend is further described by Kapisweski (2006). Until the 70s, non-local Arabs, most of the migrants in the region, promoted leftist and pan-Arab ideas. They prompted strikes and revolts for different reasons, ranging from anti-monarch sentiments and lack of legitimacy of artificial Gulf national borders to fairer redistribution of oil revenues. These protests were generally met with deportation and incarceration. Asian labor started then to be seen more favorably: cheaper, less demanding, more manageable, and less politically risky. Consequently, Asian workers in the region increased from 12% of the migrant population in 1970 to 63% in 1985, drawn mainly from the Indian subcontinent. Overall, according to Al-Shebabi (2015), the migrant workers reached over 6 million in 1985 (37% of the region's population and 70% of the workforce), a trend that continued until today (Qatar in 2012 had 94% of the workforce composed by expatriates). The flow of migrants continued to increase in the last two decades of the 20th century, and the Gulf War in 1990 strengthened the trend of replacing Arabs with South Asian labor. By the end of 2000, over 10 million expatriates were in the Gulf. A new boom of migrants characterized the period 2000-14,

thanks to the mega real-estate projects. The construction sector accounted for a third of the expatriate labor force in Qatar in this period, with wages less than half the average of the Qatari public sector.

The GCC and neoliberalism

Al-Shebabi (2015) explained that the mega real-estate projects are a facet of the neoliberal trend that spread in the Gulf as of the early 2000s. Neoliberalism is an economic belief system that strongly emphasizes the value of allowing markets to operate freely to promote economic growth and private businesses through measures such as privatization, deregulation, and liberalization. Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman are notable figures associated with this ideology, which emerged as a dominant political and economic framework to achieve development on a global scale as of the 1980s and the 1990s (Williamson, 1990). However, this goal remained on paper. In reality, it has been demonstrated that neoliberalism contributed to compounding global economic inequality (i.e., the polarization of wealth), poverty, and job precariousness (Cahill and Konings, 2017). Neoliberalism strongly supports, among others, the free circulation of capital and freedom of investment (George, 1999). In other words, it encourages the attraction of investments by creating a favorable environment for international capital flows through deregulation, investment incentives, free market policies, and reduced trade barriers. Market efficiency and competitiveness are prioritized at the expense of workers, who experiences more precariousness and fewer rights. Regarding Qatar, this emphasis on the attraction of investment to enhance competitiveness and diversification can also be found in the Qatar National Vision 2030, the country's economic blueprint until 2030 (QNV, 2008, p. 25). These considerations will be paramount in the last chapter of the thesis when Qatar's neoliberal project and the reasons behind the vulnerability of Qatar to the INGOs' advocacy campaigns will be analyzed.

A clear example of the race to the bottom of workers' rights is given by the research of Buckley (2015) when she analyzes the struggles of Asian migrant workers employed in the construction sector of Dubai during the early 2000s. In a competition among consulates in Dubai to market their construction laborers from their native countries, she describes how these consulates extolled workers' features of strength, stamina, masculinity, and ability to endure demanding work conditions based on supposedly ethnonational constructions and political obedience. In other words, a host of embodied attributes make a worker more desirable or exploitable than another based on nationality. It entails a conflict of interests: on the one hand, the consular offices are supposed to advocate their workers' rights; on the other hand, they construct workers' attractiveness on their exploitability.

Reasons behind the longevity of the Kafala

To start analyzing the reasons underpinning the longevity of the Kafala system, a good starting point is the rentier state theory. This theory (Beblawi, 1987) describes a rentier state as a society whose revenues are based on the oil rent (it has to constitute at least 40% of the government GDP), whereby the state/royal family, as the recipient of the oil wealth, is at the apex of a hierarchical division of the society, distributing this wealth (through various subsidies and well-paid public jobs) to the citizens without imposing taxation on them. As political-economic consequences, this theory argued that the distribution of the rent among the local population engendered political acquiescence. In other words, this theory was used to explain the resilience of the regimes of the rentier states in the Gulf. This paradigm was further used by the scholar Michael Herb (2014) to describe how the citizens' dependency for their income on the state's paychecks is a prominent phenomenon among the "extreme rentiers." Based on his analysis, extreme rentiers are those countries that not only are rent (oil or gas) dependent but also enjoy the highest per capita rent incomes in the world, allowing them to employ almost the totality of their citizens in the public sector. This phenomenon produced the most bifurcated labor market cases in the world, where the natives are primarily employed in the public sector, characterized by far better job conditions and salaries than the private sector, filled primarily by foreigners. In the Gulf, Kuwait, UAE, and Qatar are considered in this category. The usefulness of this theory in the thesis is three-fold: firstly, it helps to explain, as mentioned before, the reasons underpinning the strong bifurcation in the labor market in the GCC states. Thus, the Kafala can be seen as one of the instruments to ensure the maintenance of this bifurcation, which preserves citizens' privileged position in the labor market as well as reduces social tensions among Qatari citizens. Secondly, it shows one of the factors contributing to the alleged resilience of the Kafala system. In fact, the rentier state theory explains how the citizens, through the distribution of wealth, depend on state patronage for subsidies and public jobs. These privileges enjoyed by most of the citizens have led to a neglect of other economic sectors, such as manufacturing and services, that are primarily filled by imported labor managed by the Kafala system. Finally, as explained by Khalaf (2015), the Kafala system is one of the instruments the GCC government uses to distribute the state's rent wealth to its citizens. This aspect shows the intertwining between the Kafala and the distribution rationale explained by the rentier state theory.

Besides the rentier state theory, several other explanations regarding the longevity of the Kafala are provided. Khalaf (2015) gives an interpretation that aligns with the rationale of the rentier state theory, especially by putting the government's role at the center of his explanation. He underlines how the nation-state not only controls the borders, visa requirements, and residence permits but also shapes the flows of migration. In his account, the oil revenues allowed Gulf monarchies to combine coercion and loyalty by promoting high dependency among citizens, who compete to access the rent circuit, thereby discouraging

any economic and political initiatives and vertically segmenting the local society. Furthermore, the tool of citizenship is a vital instrument of social control, a system of inclusion/exclusion between citizens and migrants. Citizenship entitled natives to rights and privileges, but it was not an automatic entitlement: citizens perceived as not loyal could have been stripped of their citizenship and benefits. In this sense, as mentioned above, migration became a political tool used in two ways: Firstly, it was used to create a robust market segmentation, where expatriates were employed in the private sector and the citizens in the public sector with far better conditions. By doing that, the state ensured that the citizens relied on the largesse of the ruling family. Secondly, the Kafala system was used as an instrument of patronage and rent allocation whereby citizenship became a source of income through foreign investment ventures - having the obligation of a local partner (a citizen) to conduct business in the Gulf - and through foreign labor migration (ibid.).

Besides, Qatar society has a deep 'demographic imbalance,' a term used to describe the drastic ratio of 9:1 of foreigners over Qatari citizens (Herb, 2014, p. 3). According to "The Economist" in 2013 and a 2019 report by Human Rights Watch, approximately 94-95% of Qatar's workforce consists of foreign workers, totaling over 2 million people (The Economist, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2020). Given their numbers, the migrants are the engine of Qatar's economy. It is vital for the state to keep them as cheap deportable labor in a vulnerable position for economic and security issues. In fact, migrants in Qatar are not allowed to organize through trade unions, depriving them of an important means to address their grievances (Ten Haar 2018, p. 130). As stated by the IMF regarding the economy of UAE, a country that can be compared socially and economically to Qatar, the flexible labor policy, giving access to a vast supply of labor at internationally competitive wages, has been a key factor in its competitiveness (2005, pp. 13-14).

Furthermore, the Kafala system is a powerful means to establish control over the Qatari population. The rhetoric underpinning the demographic imbalance in Qatar is part of this aspect, as explained by Dorsey (2014): *"Abolishing the kafala system would also pull the rug on fundamental policies designed to ensure Qatari control of their state and society and preservation of their culture by effectively segregating Qataris and non-Qataris"* (ibid. p. 1745). Citizenship is a tool for rent allocation, and this division backs this super welfare system in Qatar. Considering sheer numbers, enlarging the citizen base and the number of people who can access the benefits the state grants would make the patronage system unsustainable. Keeping migrants out of any path of citizenship is a specific policy, as Dito (2015) explained. He complains that the Kafala system has been examined only as a regulatory tool misused by employers rather than a hierarchical tool that entails a specific social-political structure in the Gulf societies. He claims that exclusion is an embedded factor of Kafala because of the nature of the rentier system. The beneficiaries of the state largesse cannot be extended to all the population living in the GCC to keep the system sustainable. Because of this policy, exclusion became a pillar of it. This concept is paramount to understanding the evolution of this system, with the delegation of migrants' surveillance to the citizens being another fundamental element of

the system. In this system, sponsors have exclusive legal authority and act as the sole representatives of migrant workers vis-à-vis the state. In his analysis, he underlines the asymmetrical relation between sponsor and migrant, whereby the sponsor has unilateral authority over the entry/exit of the migrant, the renewal of the visa, the cancellation of the work permit, and the possibility of migrants changing employer. Because of it, the state deals only with the sponsor, and the migrant is excluded from any bargain. This unlimited authority is a crucial element of the benefits the sponsors enjoy vis-à-vis the migrants, which would not be possible by employing a citizen in their place. These considerations underline how the Kafala reinforces the citizens' dependency vis-à-vis the state and explain why every attempt to reform the system has been met with protests by employers, as happened in Bahrain in 2010 when a tax on the importation of migrant workers was introduced, or in Qatar in 2020 after the abolition of NOC and the introduction of a minimum wage (Al-Shebabi, 2015; Hamadah, 2022; Diop, 2018; Khalaf, 2015).

Moreover, Dito (2015) also describes the lucrative activities behind the Kafala system in the GCC countries. By doing that, he points out the ways in which employers stand to gain from the labor relationship set up by the Kafala system. The first is the typical path of private sector employment, whereby the sponsor has complete control over the migrant. The employer submits a work permit application to the Ministry of Labour, which issues the working visa and confers an unbalanced power relation to the sponsor at the expense of the migrant, as mentioned above. This path entailed various critical issues. For example, the debt bondage the migrant has to go through before their traveling and hiring caused by the inflated fees of recruitment agencies in the sending countries, the confiscation of the migrant's passport by the employer, the mental abuses, the demeaning working conditions, the nonuniform wage payments, and the limited recourse to the courts due to the fragmented institutional bodies with competence in matter of residence, labor, safety, and housing are illustrative of the migrants' predicament. This unbalanced power relationship thus allows the employer to be able to exploit the migrants to make as much profit as possible, having the opportunity to treat them like a labor commodity. The second path is the migrant (mostly female) working as a domestic servant in a private household, uncovered by any labor law. For a considerable period, the absence of labor laws covering domestic workers allowed local families (sponsors) to exploit houseworkers, resulting in additional profits being extracted at the expense of these workers. The last path is illegal rent-seeking activity. This modality consists of two forms: the first is commercial registration. The sponsor has a commercial activity, usually a tiny grocery shop, under his name and lets the migrant run the activity in his place in return for payment. Instead, in the second form, there is a trade work permit: the migrants are not bound to work for their sponsor but are free to work wherever they prefer after an illicit payment agreement with their sponsor. In this case, it is clear how the Kafala system allowed the creation of a source of income that benefited local sponsors. However, as mentioned, it was an illegal route that took advantage of the little control by local authorities and the fact that the natives themselves were in

charge of the surveillance of migrants. In Dito's analysis, these characteristics of Kafala make reforming this system more than just a legislative issue. Instead, the state/citizen relationship must be addressed. These considerations also explain the results of two surveys conducted among the Qatari population in 2012 and 2015 (Diop et al., 2018). The survey asked whether the Kafala system should be changed, and in both surveys, most of the respondents (more than 80%) preferred keeping the system the same or making it even more strict.

Moreover, the obstacles to reforming the Kafala include the issue of achieving an internationally shared approach to regulating global migration. Migration policy is a politically sensitive issue. The states retained control over the population flows within their borders and the right to access nationality, thereby negating the delegation of this power to any supranational entity (Ennis and Blarel, 2022). To analyze the migration to the Gulf and the elements that influence it, they enlarge the scope of analysis by considering the Asia-to-Gulf migrant corridor rather than the single nation-state. This corridor's governance is scattered throughout a multi-layered and multi-actor space. In addition to various pressures exerted on this corridor, such as global demands for compliance with international labor standards and labor regimes, neoliberal pressures, reputational pressures associated with events like the World Cup in Qatar, and global governance processes driven by organizations like the UN, ILO, and IOM, these factors collectively shape this domain known as the global migration governance complex (Ibid.). Understanding this paradigm is vital for comprehending the theoretical framework of this thesis. Specifically, the emphasis on the role of international organizations and their advocacy in exerting external pressure on nation-states to enact legislative reforms for the betterment of migrant workers' conditions are rooted in the concept of the global migration governance complex, which underscores the significant involvement of civil society and international organizations in addressing this issue. The lack of a shared approach to global migration has led to a vast array of ad hoc arrangements regarding migration governance, which has hindered any attempt to have a homogenized regulation of the phenomenon and to influence individual states' legislation according to international conventions protecting the rights of migrants, as the 1990 ILO Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (not ratified by the US, West European states, Australia, the GCC, and India). In this regard, it is important to mention The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), the first international agreement that regulates international migration comprehensively. Non-signatory states of the GCM in 2018 include, among others, the U.S., Canada, Australia, and Israel (Ibid., p. 11). While these examples fall within the logic of states seeking to maintain formal authority over migration, what is striking is that among the signatory states of the GCM are all the GCC countries, which, being among the host countries benefiting from this lack of effective governance and cheap unregulated labor, should be against such an agreement.

Hanieh (2015) also adopts a similar global perspective but has quite a different explanation as to why the Kafala system is so hard to eradicate. He agrees with Dito's analysis when he argues that reforming Kafala is not merely a legislative issue. However, rather than looking at the state/citizen relationship, Hanieh focuses his attention on how the global capital system works. To expand his analysis in such a way, he overcomes both the methodological nationalism that influenced the political-economic studies of migration to the Gulf and the neoclassical explanation based on push/pull factors. He claims that to understand this migration corridor, we should instead consider the regional and world-market context and how neoliberalism engendered social transformation and polarization of wealth that encouraged the migration to the Gulf. In his view, the push/pull explanation neglects the exploitation and presents the migration as a positive-sum game. The push from sending countries and the pull from receiving countries should be seen as interrelated rather than separated, with neoliberalism as the main engine. Through his international perspective, he argues that the spatial fix, that is, how the capital overcomes accumulation barriers through spatial relocation, can also be applied to migration. It would entail two main consequences: a) high rates of exploitation through discrimination depending on national origin (different nationalities in the Gulf receive different wages according to the cost of the workforce in their home countries) and through the enormous number of potential workers worldwide that the Gulf societies can draw upon; b) disciplining practices through a constant threat of deportation. The spatial fix worked at the expense of migrants in the Gulf War and the financial crisis of 2008 when they were laid off en masse. Through the strategic position of the Gulf within the global capitalist system, he shows how human rights abuses engendered by the Kafala system are not just failures of governance but a direct consequence of the system itself. As a result, efforts to address any reform of this exploitative system by human rights organizations are unlikely to be successful if they remain focused on government legislation. It is instead a worldwide imperialist systemic issue (Ibid.). It can be noticed that the issue of the Kafala system has been interpreted both through an international perspective in Hanieh's analysis and through a methodologically nationalist and employer-centric perspective in Dito's analysis. Even though the relationship between employer and employee is an important element of analysis to understand this issue, as far as I am concerned, I believe that Hanieh's analysis strikes the core of the issue. In fact, I think that the employer-centric perspective is somehow a limited analysis because the power in the hand of the employer is an outcome of the international order that allowed this kind of sponsorship system to thrive. In other words, without the existence of the latter, the former would not exist. Therefore, even though the employer-centric argument is an important element of the puzzle, it does not explain the roots of the problem but only the consequences.

The exploitation is not exceptional but systemic

The Kafala, as well as the Gulf, has been reified as illiberal and non-modern. However, policies of deportation and racialized exploitation, especially in the construction sector, are widespread worldwide. (Kanna et al.,

2020; Kanna in Kanna et al., 2020; Buckley, 2014). In other words, Western media tried to depict the migrants' exploitation as something exclusively concerning the rentier states in the Gulf, as something exceptional because of the political nature of the regimes there established and of an allegedly Gulf culture that is supposed to favor exploitative conducts. However, throughout the thesis, it will be shown how this is a far cry from explaining the true current state of affairs. The exploitation vis-à-vis the migrants is not endemic in the Arab "illiberal" countries but rather a global systemic issue.

How to locate this thesis within the academic debate

I situate my study within the framework of overcoming methodological nationalism. By doing that, it is possible to enlarge the political-economic analysis and grasp the dynamics of the market-oriented global economy throughout the neoliberalist period rather than focusing on the internal dynamics of a specific country. Neoliberalism has exacerbated the polarization of wealth and job precariousness worldwide (Cahill and Konings, 2017; Hanieh, 2015). In such a capitalist system, enhancing workers' rights is often not seen as beneficial for nation-states, as it may conflict with the principles of neoliberalism that prioritize market efficiency and competitiveness. This introduces a puzzle when trying to understand why Qatar, a nation operating within this system, adopted a reform agenda that, at least on paper, aimed to improve the rights of migrant workers.

3. Theories and methods

The theoretical framework will revolve around the rentier state theory (to understand the type of constraints embedded in the social hierarchy of the GCC states), the overcoming of methodological nationalism (to grasp the global dynamics of the migration process and neoliberalism), and the global migration governance complex (to locate the position of international organizations and INGOs and the pressure they posed on Qatar's Kafala system). Secondary sources will be used to contextualize the issue, ranging from academic articles to news articles. An array of primary sources, such as INGOs and trade union reports, resolutions of supra-national entities, ILO and IMF reports, and the Qatar National Vision 2030 plan, will be used. In particular, the INGOs campaigns' overall goals and the campaigns' effectiveness and obstacles in achieving their goals will be assessed. Qualitative content analysis will be used to gain insights into the messaging and tactics used by INGOs to promote social changes and better understand how these organizations became instrumental in enhancing workers' rights by targeting governments and influencing public opinion.

4. Chapter 1: Qatar’s labour market, Kafala, and the Technical Cooperation Programme with ILO

This chapter aims to provide an overall portrayal of the Qatari labor market and its reformative process. First, it discusses the labor market in Qatar; then, it describes the kind of abuses and violations that migrant workers in Qatar have suffered because of the Kafala system; finally, it will describe how the INGOs started to raise awareness about the migrants’ plight, the subsequent ILO technical cooperation started between 2017 and 2018, and the limits of the reforms undertaken.

Kafala system and dual labor market in Qatar, the extreme rentier Qatar

As the scholar Michael Herb (2014) explained, Qatar is an “*extreme rentier state*.” With this category, Herb describes those countries which are not only rent dependent but also rent-abundant. The latter is described as the ratio of the oil/rent export revenues to the population. In this regard, Qatar has been endowed with the world’s largest reserve of natural gas, the North Field, discovered in 1971 and likely to guarantee steady rent revenues from exportation for centuries (Ibid, p. 29). According to Qatargas, the national company that manages the source, it comprises 10% of the world’s known reserves (Qatargas, 2023). This natural endowment, coupled with the very modest size of the national population, allows Qatar to have one of the highest rents per capita in the world (Herb 2014, p. 15; IMF, 2023). This abundant wealth is enjoyed only by Qatari citizens, who formed only 14% (around 250 thousand citizens) of Qatar’s residents in 2012 (Al-Shebabi 2015, p. 18), permitting the state to give public-sector jobs to most of its citizens (Herb 2014, p. 20). Public sector jobs, in comparison with the private ones, have higher wages, more benefits, less demanding conditions, and fewer working hours. It is used to distribute the rent wealth that underpins Qataris’ high standard of living. That is why, for example, 92% of Qataris were employed in the public sector or SOEs in 2010 (Ibid, p. 21). As explained by Al-Shebabi (2015), in the oil boom after the Second World War, the limited size of the Qatari population, coupled with the challenges posed by subjecting nationals with labor rights to the influence of capitalist principles, made it impractical for them to meet the country's economic requirements. It prompted a massive importation of expatriate workforce, mainly composed of Arabs in the early mid-20th century and South and Southeast Asians from the 1970s until today, the latter seen as a low-paid and pliant workforce (Kapiszewski 2006, pp. 6-8). As can be seen from the table, India, Nepal, the Philippines, and Bangladesh made up almost three-quarters of the population in Qatar during the period between 2015 and 2016.

Estimates of foreign residents in Qatar by country of citizenship (the five most populous foreign communities, 2015-2016)

| Country of citizenship | Estimates (total population) | % to the total population of Qatar |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| India | 650.000 | 27% |
| Nepal | 350.000 | 14.5% |
| Bangladesh | 280.000 | 11.6% |
| Philippines | 260.000 | 10.8% |
| Egypt | 200.000 | 8.3% |

Source:

Estimates: Gulf Labour Markets and Migration (GLMM).

Percentages to the total population: Personal calculations obtained by comparing the estimates of the GLMM with the total population of Qatar provided by the Qatar Census 2015.

Thus, if the public sector is the main job perspective of Qatari citizens, the private sector is filled mostly by expatriates (Ibid, p. 32). The Qatar Census 2020 (pp 218-220) captures the characteristics of this dual-labor market: Qataris are mainly employed in Government departments or public companies, whereas non-Qataris can be found almost totally in the private sector or domestic work.

Expatriate workers are tied to the migration regime in force in the GCC countries, Lebanon and Jordan, the Kafala, or sponsorship system. Although each of these countries has different laws that govern the expatriate workforce, this system can generally be described as a type of governance that, to grant the migrant access to the country, requires the tie of the migrant to a local sponsor and employer (an individual citizen or a company). The sponsor has both legal and economic responsibility for the migrant throughout the duration of the contract. Thus, the responsibility is outsourced from the state to the private citizen or company. This system makes room for a vast array of abuses at the expense of the migrant. It has been the main focus of international criticism during the run-up to the 2022 World Cup.

However, it is important to emphasize that the exploitations are neither solely a consequence of the Qatari government's authoritarian nature nor the result of the allegedly Gulf's oppressive culture, as the Western media tried to portray it in an Orientalist manner. In fact, similar exploitations vis-à-vis the workers can also be found in the Global North (Babar and Vora 2022, p. 499; Kanna, 2020). Rather, it results from a profit-oriented capitalist mentality, with companies that source foreign workforce from the cheapest sending countries (Ibid., pp. 500-505; Hanieh 2015, p 66, 72; Herb 2014, p. 24). As explained by Babar and Vora (2022,

p.499), this kind of attitude, influenced by “racial capitalism” (i.e., how race steers socioeconomic structures of capitalism), is deeply connected to the British colonial/protectorate legacy of the 19th and 20th centuries (Ibid. 501; Al-Shebabi 2019).

The abuses of migrant workers in Qatar

The Kafala system has been thus internationally criticized because of the abuses at the expense of the low-skilled migrant workers. Abuses can be found as soon as the recruitment process starts from the sending countries. In fact, many workers in Qatar are used to paying high recruitment fees (up to 3,000 USD), even though such high fees are illegal in Qatar. In sending countries like Bangladesh, there is a maximum recruitment fee threshold established by law, whereas, in Nepal, the government struck a bargain with Qatar in 2005 to put the recruitment costs on the Qatari employers; nonetheless, Amnesty’s report in 2013 showed how Nepali workers still went through high fees because of a lack of control of the authorities in charge. This issue also points to the endemic corruption in the recruitment industry, which leads to a situation in which the migrants arrive in Qatar under debt bondage, forcing them to work many years only to repay that debt and leaving them without any other feasible solution (ECCHR, 2018, p. 4-5; Damir-Geilsdorf 2016, p 173).

Another issue is passport confiscation. In this case, as well, laws in Qatar forbid this practice. Nonetheless, it is very common: surveys have found that 90% of the interviewed low-income migrant in Qatar had their passport confiscated by their employees, limiting the possibility of leaving the job (Damir-Geilsdorf 2016, p. 178-180). Beyond this illegal aspect, the restriction of migrants’ movement was sanctioned by the Kafala system in Qatar until very recently, whereby migrants were not allowed to legally change jobs or leave the country without the approval of their employers through the NOC (Non-Objection Certificate). Regarding the first aspect, if a migrant decides to change jobs without the employer’s approval, they become an absconder. They can be charged with criminal offenses, jailed, or deported. (ECCHR, 2018, p. 6).

Furthermore, migrant workers’ salaries are often paid late or subjected to discriminatory deductions. In Qatar, salaries are transferred directly into the migrant’s bank account, but the employer sometimes confiscates the debit card itself. In order to contrast this phenomenon, the Wage Protection System in Qatar has been implemented to ensure that migrants are paid on time and have control of their accounts. (Ibid.)

Finally, there is the issue of the demanding working conditions that deeply affect the health and safety of workers, and the sheer numbers can clearly indicate that. According to the newspaper *The Guardian* (2021), since 2010, there have been over 6,500 deaths of low-skilled migrant workers sourced from South and Southeast Asia (Philippine migrants are omitted), with an average of twelve deaths per week. However, this figure has been refuted. In fact, it refers to all non-Qataris who have died in the past decade, considering

all the sectors, and not only the South and Southeast Asian migrants working in the construction sector (Deutsche Welle, 2022). Nonetheless, these numbers still show that working conditions in the last decade in Qatar were hazardous at the very least. The extreme heat conditions, the long working hours, the work-related incidents, and the suicides due to mental and physical harassment are among the main causes of work-related deaths.

The 2022 World Cup and the construction sector: pattern, dynamics, reforms attempted

On 2 December 2010, FIFA's president Sepp Blatter announced that the 2022 World Cup would be held in Qatar. During the twelve-year run-up to the event, the spotlight has focused on the notorious Kafala system and the treatment of migrant workers. Trade unions, INGOs, and civil society organizations have raised global awareness around this issue with campaigns and reports, especially concerning the workers in the construction sector due to the big investments to build the infrastructures in preparation for the tournament and the massive recruitment of these types of workers which led to skyrocketing numbers of Qatar's population (Economy Middle East, 2022). The burgeoning construction sector has been the main sector in which low-skilled migrants have been employed even before the winning bid for the 2022 World Cup because of the growth of the real estate market in the Gulf since the early 2000s, driven by a will to diversify the economy (De Bel-Air, 2014, p.8). Since the announcement of Qatar's hosting, the main concern of advocacy groups for migrants' rights has been the potential abuses, unsafe working conditions, and exploitation that migrant workers would have gone through during the run-up of the event. These warnings became a reality. Human rights violations, wage theft, and hard-working conditions have been reported throughout the last decade; it was facilitated by the Kafala system, which, by empowering the employer to control the legal status and mobility of the migrant he sponsored, systemically fostered these violations.

In the first years of the run-up, there has been a massive quantity of reports denouncing this predicament. The raised awareness around this issue and the complaints voiced by various international advocacy groups led to the submission of a complaint file at the UN-agency International Labour Organization (ILO) against the government of Qatar regarding the violation of Convention no. 29 (Force Labour Convention) and no. 81 (Labour Inspection Convention) in 2014; this, in turn, spurred the ILO into making itself available to furnish technical assistance to the government of Qatar to address the main criticalities concerning the Kafala system through reforms toward more effective compliance with international labour standards (ILO, 2016, pp 1-2; ILO, 2022, p. 2-3).

As a result, after years of negotiations, in 2017, ILO and Qatar started the Technical Cooperation Programme to carry out important labor reforms. In April 2018, the ILO opened its office in Doha. It is crucial

to note that Qatar faces competition with other GCC members and the global community at large in its efforts to attract skilled workers and foreign investments, aiming to foster a diversified and knowledge-based economy. This objective is outlined in Qatar's National Vision 2030, a comprehensive document that delineates the national development plan until 2030 (QNV 2030, 2008). Thus, enhancing the international reputation through adherence to international labor standards has served as a powerful incentive for this collaboration and represents one of the primary channels through which international pressure can influence Qatar's internal policy. The wide-range reforms implemented under this cooperation have addressed multiple critical aspects of the Kafala system, up to the point that the ILO has stated that the Kafala system has been dismantled (ILO 2022, p. 5). Among the most important reforms and newly introduced regulations, workers have the right to change jobs and leave the country without the employer's permission since 2020; a minimum wage was set in 2021 in addition to the obligation for the employer to provide accommodation and food allowance for the migrant workers; the Wage Protection System, established in 2015 to control the regular payment of workers' wages and prevent wage abuses, has been strengthened in 2019 through better enforcement and a wider coverage, in addition to penalties for companies that fail to complain with this aspect; an online complaints platform was established in 2021 to give the workers a venue to address their grievances; joint committees within the companies, composed by the management and workers, were established in 2019 to resolve work-related issues; labor inspections have been strengthened through national policies, training, and campaigns; new legislation to mitigate job-related heat stress during the summer was adopted in 2021, whereby the hours in which the outdoor work is prohibited were augmented; in 2019, 14 Qatar Visa Centers were established in six labor-sending countries to address recruitment-related issues (Ibid. p. 5-21). These results show how the Qatar government, on paper, strove to put in place reforms that other GCC countries have never implemented, helping achieve important results to enhance migrants' condition (ILO 2022). However, it takes time to change ingrained practices and achieve a new socioeconomic balance with the vast array of stakeholders involved in the profits linked to the Kafala system.

Furthermore, there is still much to do to solve migrants' grievances related to the Kafala. For example, several employers have retaliated against workers willing to change jobs through threats of deportation (Ibid. p. 5). More in general, a lack of enforcement of these new measures has been the main problem, and abusive labour environments are still a widespread reality in the country: significant labour and human rights violations have been registered at the expense of migrant workers in World Cup-affiliated hotels, threatened with salary cuts to prevent them for taking days off, fined for mistakes at work, living in overcrowded conditions, exposed to gender-based violence and harassment and to nationally-based wage discrimination, and still paying illegal recruitment fees (Equidem, 2022a; The Guardian, 2022); in August 2022, the Qatari police arrested at least 60 migrant workers who protested for unpaid wages for as long as seven months from construction and hospitality ventures (Forbes, 2022). In other words, employers still find themselves in an upper-hand position vis-à-vis the migrant workers. The latter can be threatened by

canceling their visas and repatriation or being denounced as runaway workers. Enforcing new laws, assuring their compliance, and changing a deep-rooted mentality in which the migrant is seen mostly as a commodity from which extracting profits and benefits, cannot be done overnight.

Laws in Qatar regulating labor and sponsorship and the most relevant reforms related to the World-Cup migrant workers in the period examined

| Law | Content |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Law No. 14 of 2004 (Qatari Labor Law) | It shall apply to the employers and workers, and prescribe their rights and obligations and regulates the relationship between them. |
| Law No. 4 of 2009 (Sponsorship Law) | It regulates the entry and exit of expatriates, their residence and sponsorship. |
| Law No. 21 of 2015 | Amendment of the Law No. 4 of 2009 regarding the entry and exit of expatriates. Control of exit visa transferred from the employer to the Ministry of Interior |
| Law No. 1 of 2017 | Amendment of the Law No. 14 of 2004 and Law No. 21 of 2015 regarding aspects of the exit from the country |
| Law No. 13 of 2017 | Amendment of the Law No. 14 of 2004. to improve the scope of the Labor Dispute Committees |
| Law No. 13 of 2018 | Amendment of the Law No. 1 of 2017. Removal of the exit permit for migrant workers |
| Law No. 17 of 2020 | Set minimum wage for all private-sector workers |
| Law No. 19 of 2020 | Amendment of Law No. 21 of 2015: removal of NOC requirement to change job for migrant workers. |

Source: ILO (2004; 2015; 2017a; 2017b; 2018; 2020a; 2020b); Qatar Legal Portal (2009)

5. Chapter 2: The NGOs' role within the migration corridor from South and Southeast Asia to Qatar

The aim of this chapter is to illustrate the migration corridor from South and Southeast Asia to Qatar, which plays a significant role in sourcing migrant workers, particularly for the World Cup, and the activities conducted by NGOs in favor of the rights of these migrants. To do that, firstly, I will analyze the recruitment phase of the migrants in their countries of origin in South and Southeast Asia. Then I will describe the migration governance that manages the corridor. After that, I will locate the role of NGOs within this governance. Finally, I will focus on their advocacy in practice, bringing some practical examples. The goal is two-fold. On the one hand, I want to show to what extent this is a transnational phenomenon involving many actors, such as nation-states, NGOs, private recruitment agencies, and brokers. On the other hand, I aim to show the crucial role played by NGOs in advocating for migrant rights and influencing the policy process of Qatar regarding migrant workers' rights. Showing how the NGOs asserted a certain degree of pressure is essential to understand why their pressure has been successful in bringing important changes in labor reforms in Qatar, culminating with the technical cooperation with ILO started in 2018.

The migration cycle of the corridor South/Southeast Asia – Qatar: the recruitment phase

As mentioned before, the focus on this specific corridor is due since most of the migrants recruited to Qatar to fill the construction sector in order to build the infrastructure needed to host the 2022 World Cup were mainly drawn from South and Southeast Asia as temporary migrant workers (De Bel-Air, 2014, pp. 5-6; Migration Forum in Asia 2017, p. 2). This migration corridor has provided over 65% of Qatar's total migrant population, with six Asian countries (India, Nepal, The Philippines, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan) massively represented in the Qatari construction workforce. This sector has been affected most: in preparation for the 2022 World Cup, Qatar has invested over \$200 billion in real estate and infrastructures related to the event (e.g., eight new stadiums, team base camps for athletes, overhauling of the rail network, a new metro system), an endeavor that required between 500,000 and 1.5 million of foreign workers (Ganji, 2016, p. 222-223). This corridor ensures a steady supply of cheap disposable workers in the lowest rungs of the Qatari economy and a flow of remittances to the migrants' countries of origin. The economic interests linked to the remittances outflow from Qatar – US\$ 9 billion in 2009 (Endo and Afram, 2011, p. 14) - spurred the countries of origin to weaken their worker welfare protections, as documented by ITUC (ITUC, 2015).

This migration cycle consists of four phases: recruitment, deployment, employment, and return. I will briefly focus on the first step, the recruitment phase, to stress how the abuses of migrant workers in Qatar begin well before their arrival and how this issue must be analyzed beyond the nation-state dimension. In

other words, this focus points out that methodologically nationalism is inadequate to study this phenomenon (Blarel & Ennis, 2022, p. 4).

In the recruitment phase, firms operating in Qatar submit a request for a foreign labor force to the Qatari Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MLSA). After the authorization to begin recruiting foreign workers, firms can contact Qatari private recruitment agencies to manage the visa process in the migrants' countries of origin. In turn, these agencies engage with manpower agencies in the countries of origin of migrant workers to locate the aspiring migrants and assist them throughout the visa authorization process. However, especially at the rural level, these agencies rely upon intermediaries, that is, labor brokers, who recruit potential migrants from the villages and assist them through the process (e.g., obtaining travel documents, completing applications, organizing the travel from the countryside to the city where manpower agencies are located). Most of these brokers are unlicensed and exist because manpower agencies do not operate in rural areas. Finally, recruitment agencies provide the names of aspirant migrants to the Qatari recruitment agencies (Endo and Afram, 2011, pp. 6-7; Amnesty 2011, p. 24-25). In this phase, many cases of abuse occur, such as charging recruitment fees well above the legal limit and deception over contractual terms regarding the salary or the type of job offered. To pay migration costs, aspiring migrants are forced to take out loans at high interest. The indebtedness in which the migrants occur is a key factor that pushes them into exploitation and forced labor once they arrive in Qatar (Amnesty 2011, p. 33-36).

The migration governance of the South and Southeast Asia-to-Qatar corridor and the Qatari local labor laws

The migration governance of the South and Southeast Asia-to-Qatar corridor, namely the framework of laws, regulations, and policies adopted to regulate the migration, settlement, and returns between the Asian countries of origin and Qatar, is a highly fragmented, complex, and disputed issue. The main problem affecting the development of a well-regulated migration process within this corridor is the lack of willingness, on behalf of the nation-states, to delegate their migration policies to multilateral institutions (Piper et al., 2018, p. 125). The main reason behind this resistance is the desire to maintain national sovereignty over migration policies and regulations and the consequent unwillingness to rely upon legally binding agreements. In other words, governments are careful to avoid interfering in their migration policies and maintain the ability to control the migration flow within their national borders (Geiger, 2015, p. 192; Piper & Grugel, 2015, p. 267; Blarel & Ennis, 2022, p. 9, 13). The result of this type of approach to migration governance is the lack of a comprehensive multilateral framework, whereby international migration is divided into many different regimes characterized by ad hoc arrangements, that is, non-binding Memorandums of Understanding and bilateral agreements revolving around economic and security issues (Blarel & Ennis, 2022, p. 9; 11; 16). This

focus prioritizes market liberalization over protecting migrants' human rights (Piper et al. 2018, p. 126); these agreements do not challenge the economic structure underpinning the unequal development but focus solely on managing the migration flows. Moreover, these ad hoc arrangements, if established stronger protection for migrant workers of a particular sending country, may prompt deleterious competition between these countries, with destination countries turning to labor-sending countries with lesser protective measures toward their migrant workers (Migration Forum in Asia, n.a., p. 7).

Due to the reluctance to bind themselves to formal multilateral arrangements, governments resorted to regional consultative processes (RCPs). Related to the migration corridor object of this chapter, the two most relevant processes are the Colombo Process and the Abu Dhabi Dialogue, which are avenues that provide a non-binding environment to discuss and foster cooperation on labor migration issues, bringing together representatives of states, supra-national organizations, and NGOs. The Ministerial Consultation on Overseas Employment and Contractual Labor for Countries of Origin (Colombo Process) was established in 2003 in Colombo, Sri Lanka, gathering a total of eleven member states: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam. The themes addressed in this RCP are protecting migrant workers, enhancing labor mobility, sharing experiences and best practices in labor migration management, and improving data collection and inter-state cooperation (Piper & Rother, 2022, p. 2938; Migration Forum in Asia, n.a.). The Ministerial Consultation on Overseas Employment and Contractual Labor for Countries of Origin and Destination in Asia (Abu Dhabi Dialogue) was established in 2008 and consisted of the member states of the Colombo Process with the addition of six Gulf countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE) and Malaysia. Thus, unlike the Colombo Process, it also includes the main countries of destination of migration. The objectives of this RCP are similar to the Colombo Process ones, namely, sharing experience, developing partnerships, cooperation, and dialogue among the stakeholders (Abu Dhabi Dialogue, n.a.).

Passing from a regional to a holistic level, the most notable agreements are the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM) and the ILO international labor conventions. The GCM is the first agreement ratified by a majority of states, adopted in 2016, to cooperate on international migration. Still, the little consensus over the policy guidelines, their implementations, and the lack of ratification by key actors (such as the U.S. and Australia) have hampered its efficacy (Blarel & Ennis, 2022, pp. 10-11). The ILO conventions provide some of the most relevant policy frameworks in international law regarding migrant rights. ILO has been a UN norm-setting international organization since its establishment in 1919; its primary task is to set and promote international labor standards on labor migration (Piper & Foley, 2021, p. 261; Blarel & Ennis, p. 10). Qatar has been a member of ILO since 1972. However, the lack of ratification of critical ILO conventions (ILO website), such as, among others, the Convention (No. 97) on Migration for Employment, which provides a general framework for the protection of migrant workers, the Convention (No.143) on

Migrant Workers, which deals with the extension of fair and decent working condition for migrant workers, and the Convention (no. 189) on Domestic Workers, dealing with the protection of this particular category of workers, has limited the upholding of international legislative frameworks that could better protect and enhance the conditions of migrant workers in Qatar. Another important international agreement to mention Qatar has not ratified is the Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Family, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1990, providing a framework for the protection of the human rights of all migrant workers and their families (ONHCR Website).

Thus, it is clear that international organizations have no legal power to enforce their frameworks; the actual legislative jurisdiction resides at the state level. This consideration is crucial, especially when considering the circumstances in which major sports events such as the World Cup occur. Domestic law is the main legally binding source for national sports bodies, host local entities, private contractors, and sponsors, upon which international human and labor rights standards do not apply automatically (Heerdt, 2011, p. 10). In Qatar, the most important laws that regulated labor and migration aspects before the technical cooperation with ILO in 2017 were the Law No. 14 of 2004 (Labor Law), which regulated employment; Law No. 4 of 2009 (Sponsorship Law), which regulated the entry, exit, residence, and sponsorship of migrant labor, and the Law No. 21 of 2015 (the amendment of the Law No. 4), which regulated similar aspects of the Sponsorship Law in addition to dealing with the worker welfare protections required in Qatar (Ganji, 2016, p. 227).

As a result, the governance of this migration corridor is a complex structure of legal norms that are unevenly recognized and applied by countries of origins and destinations, on multiple layers, from national and sub-national to supra-national levels. The uneven adoption of international conventions makes establishing and enforcing a global common standard on labor migrant rights hard. After having provided a general outline of the migration governance underpinning the (un)regulated migration corridor from South and Southeast Asia to the Gulf (in our particular case, Qatar), I can now pass on the role of the INGOs in this transnational space to understand their positionality within this frame, what is their role, and how they can influence the national policies.

The Role of the INGOs in the migration governance

The lack of common regulation that characterizes the Asia-to-Gulf migration corridor and the reliance by nation-states on nonbinding commitments regarding the area of labor migration has left important gaps in migrant rights protection. As a result, this status quo has exposed migrants to exploitative factors. In this regard, the category of temporary transnational workers, such as the construction workers who emigrate from South and Southeast Asia to Qatar, is particularly affected by the fragmented migration governance.

Furthermore, the desire to uphold labor migration policies within the framework of the nation-state, which is often seen as the final stronghold of national sovereignty in an era of globalization, is an additional factor that impacts this particular group of workers.

Traditionally, labor rights have been mainly discussed on the national level, with the government being considered the paramount actor tasked with protecting its citizens through enforcing and supervising labor laws. However, this protection mechanism has usually been associated with citizenship (Seidman 2004, p. 109). That is the reason why transnationally labor migrants came to find themselves in an unfavorable position in this type of regime: they do not possess citizenship of the hosting state – all the more relevant in the Qatari case, as explained in the chapter before when describing the functioning of the Kafala system and how citizenship is the main dividing line through which establish who can enjoy or not certain economic and legal benefits – so they come to be excluded from the country of destination's protection. In addition, it is crucial to highlight that the countries of origin of these migrants have often failed to provide adequate protection for their migrant workforce. One such example is The Philippines, where remittances play a significant role in the national economy. However, the forces of the global market, driven by private actors pursuing neo-liberal and free-trade principles, have contributed to a deregulation of the country's labor export industry. This shift towards privatization has allowed the government to absolve itself of responsibility regarding the welfare of its migrant workers (Ball and Piper, 2002, pp. 1020-22). In fact, within a purely competitive rationale, the more the countries of origin weaken their protective measures vis-à-vis their migrant workers, the more the latter would become an attractive workforce to be recruited by countries of destination such as the GCC countries, which have already displayed their tendency to draw on foreign workforce according to this logic.

Considering this type of situation, INGOs' paramount role in the labor migration field is clear. These movements grew rapidly since the 1990s, partly as a response to the global decline of trade unions and the casualization of the workforce within neoliberalist dynamics (Piper & Grugel, 2015, p. 265). Due to a lack of international cooperation and fragmented national interests that neglect the welfare of non-citizens and do not tackle migration from a perspective of migrant rights but from a depoliticized managerial perspective, these organizations have entered the arena to provide assistance and advocate in favor of the marginalized international workforce (Geiger, 2015, p. 193; Piper & Grugel, 2015, p. 263-264; Piper & Rother, 2022, p. 2930). Their work of advocacy, aimed at pressuring states and mobilizing public opinion, made the global civil society movements an important factor in the migration governance within the corridor from South and Southeast Asia to Gulf. Their endeavor has been an important element in promoting legal reforms that enhanced the conditions of migrant workers in the GCC during the decade preceding the 2022 World Cup (Stella Morgana, 2022, p. 218; Ter Haar, 2018, p. 131).

After having briefly outlined the position of the INGOs within the migration governance framework, I will go on by analyzing the way in which these organizations have tried to influence the Qatari policy during the run-up to the 2022 World Cup.

INGOs in action

INGOs are important players and sources of valuable information regarding the plight of migrant workers, who are trapped between discriminatory policies of destination countries and the economic needs of origin countries, which are more interested in managing a steady outflow of migrants to grant economic remittances for their national economies rather than protecting the rights of their citizens. However, even though they had the willingness to do so, their economically weak position vis-à-vis the destination countries and the competition among origin countries in providing the cheapest and most flexible temporary workers to the destination countries would hamper any attempt of this kind (Piper & Gruger, 2015, p. 264; MFA, n.a., p. 7).

One of the main shortcomings of the multilateral governance of labor migration is the managerial approach embedded in it. As mentioned above, this approach mainly focuses on managing a steady and smooth flow of migrants from their countries of origin to the ones of the destination while neglecting the abusive work conditions and the deficient and poor labor standards endured by migrant workers. Conversely, the INGOs, tackling these issues, propose an alternative vision of labor migration governance: the so-called rights-based approach, counterposed to the traditional managerial approach of the nation-states. This effort allows the INGOs to politicize the global migration area and contrast the attempt by neoliberal narratives to depoliticize the issue and pose it as merely a managerial problem that can be solved with the right policies without overhauling the entire functioning of the economic system underpinning the abuses (Piper & Rother, 2022, p. 2930-2931).

Major sports events are important opportunities for NGOs, which can leverage the global spotlight, the global scrutiny, and media coverage afforded by these types of manifestations to denounce and raise awareness about human rights abuses related to the event, making the unheard voice of the vulnerable swathe of the population loud. The 2022 World Cup in Qatar has not been the exception to the rule, as already happened in the recent past on the occasions of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing or the 2012 Olympics in London, with Amnesty International and Human Right Watch among the main NGOs involved in the scrutiny and contestations (Brownell, 2012; Timms, 2012). In the first case, the social issue was the lack of commitment on behalf of the Chinese government to engage in human rights; in the second case, NGOs advocated for more protection and enhanced standard labor rights in the global garment industry that supplied the Olympics.

The 2022 World Cup, as one of the major worldwide MSEs, has been used by human and migrant rights groups, as well as international media, as a platform to raise concerns over the appalling conditions of working migrants employed in Qatar, especially the ones in the construction sector, since between 500,000 and 1 million additional workers have been needed to complete the required infrastructure for the World Cup. The World Cup bid has catalyzed labor reforms, triggering global advocacy by civil rights groups like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and ITUC. Their voices raised on this international platform provoked a global outcry and prompted investigations by norm-setting international bodies like the ILO. This led to future technical cooperation between ILO and Qatar for delivering important labor reforms. Here, I will briefly outline how these advocacy groups operated during the run-up to the 2022 World Cup.

Report (advocacy of supporting units)

Reports have been used to provide data and information about the plight of migrant workers in Qatar, thereby raising awareness about this type of issue, both directed to the public audience, the governments, FIFA, business companies involved in the World Cup, and IOs. Throughout the decade preceding the 2022 World Cup, a vast array of reports have been produced on the conditions and abuses of migrant workers in Qatar. The data of these documents are usually obtained by INGOs through interviews with workers on the spot (in their accommodation or worksite), but also from the Ministry of Interior and Labor of Qatar and interviews with government officials. The summary of the reports is also transmitted to the government of Qatar in order to have a response to the violations that emerge from the research.

In the aftermath of the awarding of the World Cup's bid to Qatar in 2010, Human Rights Watch, an important international INGO that carried out similar campaigns of protests against the violation of human rights and labor standards on the occasion of other major sports events in the past, published the report *"Building a Better World Cup: Protecting migrant workers in Qatar ahead of FIFA 2022"* in 2012 (HMW, 2012). The report, based on 73 interviews with migrants and meeting with representatives from the Labor Ministry, the Qatar National Human Rights Committee, and diplomatic staff (ibid, p. 28-29), focused on various issues regarding the poor treatment of migrant workers in Qatar employed in the construction industry, such as poor working conditions in construction sites, ranging from dangerous work environment to limited access to healthcare (p. 66-69); the problem of the recruitment fees, charged on migrants to the benefits of both recruitment agencies in labor-sending countries and in Qatar, forced to borrow at high-interest rates and put them in a vulnerable condition because the need to repay the loan (ibid., p. 52-55); substitution of the contract, with consequently deception on the salary and the type of job one is employed (ibid. p. 57); low wages, nonpayment, and underpayment of wages (ibid. p. 62); poor living conditions in labor camps (ibid. p.

65); the widespread practice of passport confiscation (Ibid. p. 73); obstacles to redress the abuses to the competent authorities (Ibid. p. 77-85); and finally, the issue related to the sponsorship system or Kafala, which, before the reforms brought under the cooperation between ILO and Qatar, restricted migrant workers' ability to change jobs even in abusive conditions – if they left the job without the employer's permission, they become absconded, illegal residents, thus facing criminal charges and the threat of deportation - and to leave the country (Ibid. 69-75). Throughout the period in which the report was drafted, HRW inquired the Qatari state, FIFA, the Supreme Committee, the US firm CH2M Hill tasked with overseeing the World Cup 2022 facilities, and other companies with construction management responsibilities related to the World Cup locations such as Aspire Logistics and Bechtel, in order to have a response on the issues, obtain further data, and to pressure them into some reforming actions. This is only an example of the multitude of reports produced throughout the decade preceding the World Cup 2022 by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty, ITUC, and several other advocacy groups and international media. The reports elicited an international response, such as the European Parliament's resolution adopted in 2013 to address the migrants' plights in Qatar (European Parliament, 2013).

Campaigns

Campaigns are another useful tool to raise awareness about social issues. In particular, they are an instrument for raising awareness among the global audience, thereby pressuring governments and international organizations to take action.

One of the biggest campaigns that took place during the run-up to the World Cup 2022 is "*Playfair Qatar*," initiated by ITUC in 2014, focusing on the predicament of the construction workers employed in the 2022 World Cup-related construction projects. Play Fair is a global campaign comprising several international trade union federations and NGOs. The launch of Playfair Qatar followed the successful initiative of "*Playfair Brazil*" in 2012, waged in relation to the World Cup 2014 in Brazil (Salazar et al., 2017, p. 121). The campaign "*Playfair Qatar*" sought to raise awareness faced by migrant workers in Qatar, pressure FIFA to take the appropriate measures to tackle the issue, and promote wider reforms to Qatar's labor laws and the abolition of the Kafala system (Russell, 2017a; 2017b; 2022). Practically speaking, the campaign consisted of football fans around the world taking pictures with posters that read "Qatar, Play by the Rules," "FIFA, Stop Foul Play in Qatar," and the like, to send the pictures to Playfair Qatar's website eventually. The campaign has been a major focus of the ITUC's work in recent times, including research to expose the abuses, advocacy work, and activities of pressure on FIFA to include workers' rights enhanced standards in its sports events, building momentum for change and reform actions. Playfair Qatar also targeted FIFA's eight big sponsors (Adidas, Gazprom, Hyundai, Kia, McDonald's, Budweiser, Coca-Cola, and Visa) to use their position to urge Qatar to

reform the Kafala system (Hann, 2015; The Guardian, 2015). Overall, the campaign reached important goals: bringing attention to the poor working conditions faced by migrant workers in Qatar, helping to bring reforms to Qatar's labor laws, and pressuring FIFA to take a more proactive role in overseeing working conditions and human rights monitoring.

Another initiative that brought pressure upon FIFA is the global campaign #PayupFIFA, launched in 2022 and joined by important international advocacy groups (Human Rights Watch, Amnesty, FairSquare), in addition to a global coalition of rights groups, unions, and fan groups all over the world. The campaign demanded that FIFA provides financial compensation (\$440m) for the abuses suffered by migrant workers (deaths, unpaid wages, recruitment costs). However, despite the widespread support, endorsed even by Adidas, one of the main FIFA sponsors, FIFA refused to compensate workers, although, from their exploitation, it generated profits of up to \$7.5 billion (Business and Human Rights Centre, 2022; Equidem, 2022b).

Online petitions

In 2014, the anti-slavery organization Freedom United, partnering with ITUC, launched an online petition. The goal of the petition was to call on FIFA to use its position to grant future World Cups free from slavery, starting with Qatar, abolish the Kafala system, and improve working conditions, with the impressive support of 141.030 petitions (Freedom United, n.a.). This action and the other advocacy campaigns helped put pressure on FIFA, which recognized the issue. In 2017, FIFA established the Human Rights Advisory Board to oversee the respect of human rights standards in its events.

Demonstrations

Mass demonstrations are another venue to increase public awareness of the abuses and put pressure to address the issue. One of these demonstrations, "*Red Card for FIFA*," occurred in Zurich in 2013. The protesters rallied outside FIFA's headquarters carrying red cards and banners asking to revoke the bid for the World Cup to Qatar, accusing FIFA of connivance over the rights abuses and of putting profit rationale ahead of people's lives (The Tribune, 2013).

Lobbying and suing

In March 2014, during the 320th session of the ILO Governing Body Conference in Geneva, ITUC and Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI) submitted complaints against Qatar over the issue of workers' rights,

the Kafala system, and the prohibition to joining unions and strike, based on the non-observance by Qatar of the Forced Labor Convention, 1930 (No. 29) (ILO, 2014). Because of the commitment made by INGOs and the international community in pressuring Qatar, the government agreed to reform the sponsorship system in 2015 with the new sponsorship law no.21, although the law failed to bring meaningful reforms to the Kafala (HRW, 2015), which remained unchanged until the breakthrough cooperation with ILO in 2018.

Another interesting case happened in 2016 when the Netherlands Trade Union Confederation (FNV), the country's largest trade union, representing a former Bangladeshi migrant worker in Qatar, Nadim Shariful Alam, sued FIFA in the Swiss court. Alam's story is common to many other migrant workers in Qatar: thanks to a loan and the mortgaging of his land, he paid a recruitment agency in Bangladesh almost \$4,000 to work as a construction worker in Qatar in 2014; he was fired in 2016, so forced to return in Bangladesh because of the Kafala system that prohibited migrants to change employer without the employer's approval while in Qatar; because of his dismissal, the company that had hired him reimbursed only less than 10% of his recruitment fees. The case, also joined by the Bangladesh Free Trade Union Congress (BFTUC) and the Bangladesh Building and Wood Workers Federation (BBWWF), argued that FIFA had not imposed any condition on Qatar on the occasion of the awarding bid in 2010 to ensure better protection of construction workers' rights. However, the Swiss court eventually rejected the sue (Compliance Week, 2016; Business and Human Rights Centre, 2016).

To sum up, these examples are in no way meant to be comprehensive but only illustrative of how the INGOs and the advocacy groups voiced their demands and pressured Qatar and the international bodies to make reforms during the period preceding the ILO technical cooperation with Qatar, which started in 2018, thereby influencing the policy process and enhancing migrants' conditions, with the exception of the #PayupFIFA campaign, initiated in 2022. In particular, I selected these kinds of campaigns for various reasons: Playfair Qatar is a campaign with a legacy since it followed the successful initiative of Playfair Brazil, thereby denoting its effectiveness and its global reach, and it is definitely one of the most advertised initiatives carried out by the INGOs since 2010; #PayupFIFA gained strong traction on social media and the support of Adidas; Freedom United's online petition had a wide reach and engagement, it prompted massive public support, with more than 140,000 supporters, contributing to raising public awareness on the issue; Red Card for FIFA is an important demonstration that took place in Geneva, generating international attention through a popular visual image such as the red card used in football. I think that selecting a range of campaigns using different tactics and methods has shown how the action of the advocacy groups unraveled during this decade of contestations. In some cases, it has also pointed out the importance of the Internet and social media in enlarging the range of these campaigns, rendering them more effective and widespread. These endeavors helped raise awareness, mobilize public opinion, and increase pressure to accelerate the reform process in Qatar.

In the next chapter, I will finally be able to analyze why the international advocacy campaign succeeded in its international pressure and, more importantly, why Qatar accepted this partnership with ILO, thus trying to answer the research question of the thesis.

6. Chapter 3: The difficult “marriage” of neoliberalism and human rights

This chapter is devoted to the analysis aimed at understanding Qatar’s motivation for hosting the World Cup and their motivations for being influenced by the INGOs’ campaigns as well as engaging with the ILO through the Technical Cooperation started in 2018.

My argument is the following: the state of Qatar made itself vulnerable to international pressure in dealing with human rights abuses and beginning a reform process during the run-up to the World Cup because of its neoliberal project, which compelled the Qatari state itself, in order to become a primary player in the international stage, to uphold human rights in order to be credibly and accepted by the international community. In fact, the lack of engagement with human rights can harm the country’s international reputation and its economic trajectory, negatively affecting the perceptions of investors and consumers. In order to unfold this reasoning, I will develop this chapter as follows: firstly, I will outline the neoliberal project of Qatar to understand the pillars upon which this political-economic trajectory relies. Then, I will explain the reasons why Qatar wanted to host the 2022 World Cup, the politics of enhancing the government’s soft power, and the reputational risks attached to this sport event. After that, I will be more specific in explaining the specific reasons why, on the one hand, Qatar has been vulnerable to advocacy campaigns and, on the other hand, why the INGO campaigns have been effective. Finally, I will present an argument dealing with the reforms put in place during the ILO cooperation with Qatar since 2018, trying to reconcile the commitment to human rights on behalf of Qatar with its neoliberal trajectory.

Qatar’s neoliberal project from the 2000s until today

Although the GCC countries facilitated the spread of neoliberal policies throughout the MENA region during the 1970s and the 1980s and benefitted from the opening up of the region engendered in these projects (Hanieh 2015, p. 63), we cannot talk of neoliberal policies applied to the GCC countries until the early 2000s, when for the first time the rentier economies of the Gulf started pursuing long-term economic development goals connected to the privatization and the promotion of free, open, and deregulated markets, with the goal of enhancing economic growth, global competitiveness, and the specific issue related to these countries, that of diversification away from the oil economy. In fact, during this period, when privatized real estate mega-projects and privatization, in general, took off, the ‘free market’ mantra took root in the region. However, the drawing line dividing the public and the private in the GCC is muddy (Al-Shebabi, 2015, pp. 32-34).

Qatar’s neoliberal project is enshrined in the Qatar National Vision 2030 (QNV), launched in 2008, defining the long-term goals for the country and providing a blueprint upon which national strategies and

policy plans will be developed. The aim of this framework is to transform Qatar's economy by 2030 into a knowledge-based economy and a hub for international businesses while diversifying the economy away from hydrocarbon resources and attracting skilled labor from abroad. Overall, this strategy focuses on key points, such as steering the economy away from the hydrocarbon industry and toward new industries such as tourism, education, and real estate; attracting foreign investment and international businesses; pursuing privatization and deregulation. The QNV 2030 also offers the opportunity to notice a subtle shift in the Qatari government's approach vis-à-vis its citizens. Unlike previous approaches that focused on protecting citizens from economic changes during the early years of the oil industry (Al-Shebabi, 2015), the QNV 2030, by investing in their human capital and fostering entrepreneurship, emphasizes the active engagement of citizens, allowing them to take part in and benefit from new economic developments. In other words, the vision shifts from a protective stance to an encouraging one, where Qatari citizens are safeguarded and encouraged to actively participate and profit from the country's progress. These developments rely upon the strong presence of the government in supporting and funding these strategies.

Economically, as explained above, Qatar's neoliberal project has engendered a focus on privatized real estate mega-projects that involved significant investments in infrastructure, including the construction of ports, highways, and airports to posit itself as a logistic hub (Ziadah, 2018), as well as world-class sporting facilities and tourist attractions. Moreover, the country sought to establish a friendly business environment by offering incentives to foreign investors, free economic zones to attract foreign companies, and tax exemptions to encourage investment (Ibid.).

Considering this neoliberal project, the reasons behind Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup become clear. It acted as a catalyst for economic growth and investment in infrastructure, accelerating the development of tourism and hospitality industries with the construction of hotels, residential and commercial properties, entertainment venues, tourist-related infrastructures, and the like (ITUC 2015b, p. 8), and leveraging the event to provide a strong stimulus for foreign investments (Ibid, p. 18), as exemplified, inter alia, by international hotel chains such as Marriott or Hilton opening new locations months before the inauguration of the football tournament (Qatar Tribune, 2022; The National News, 2022), the construction of the new Red Line North metro in Doha, which included a consortium of Italian and South Korean companies (MEED, 2013), and the Hamad International Airport, whose construction involved a joint venture between companies from Turkey and Japan (Zutec, n.a.).

Thus, from this account, it becomes straightforward that this neoliberal development is underpinned by a strong need for global attraction, whether in terms of tourism, businesses, skilled workers, or foreign investments. The market has become global, and the more a country can attract resources from abroad, the better it will position itself in the neoliberal global race. In order to do that, it is clear how important it is for a state to present itself as an actor that respects internationally recognized values as human rights. Without

a commitment to these principles, tourism can be negatively affected, and companies can be spurred to direct their investments somewhere else in order to avoid any negative publicity or the so-called reputational risks.

Major sports events (MSEs) between reputational risks and sensationalism

The 2022 World Cup is not the first major sport event held by Qatar, which used sports events to brand itself as a hub for sports, tourism, and entertainment. MotoGP, ATP tennis, Master's Golf, and the Asian Games in 2006 are just a few examples of the sports events Qatar hosted recently. However, none of them is comparable to the World Cup in terms of significance and international scrutiny. Hosting the 2022 World Cup subjected Qatar to extensive global scrutiny, consisting of a twelve-year global advocacy campaign from 2010, the bid award, to 2022, the tournament's inauguration. This campaign was in response to the working conditions and human rights violations of migrant workers used to build the required infrastructure for the football tournament. These violations, connected to the sponsorship system, the Kafala, that was in place in Qatar until the technical cooperation with the ILO in 2018, attracted international attention by framing this system as an issue of forced labor and modern-day slavery.

As explained in the previous chapter, major sports events (MSEs) are platforms routinely used by advocacy groups to raise awareness toward particular social issues, such as the violation of human rights. The 2022 World Cup in Qatar, as the most important major sport event worldwide, has not been the exception to the rule, as already happened in the recent past on the occasions of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing or the 2012 Olympics in London, with Amnesty International and Human Right Watch among the main NGOs involved in the scrutiny and contestations (Brownell, 2012; Timms, 2012). These groups leverage the media coverage and government scrutiny that such MSEs make available for the short to medium term, thereby bringing abuses and violations to the front line of public opinion, spurring a causal chain that posited the 2022 World Cup as an alleged catalyst for positive change for migrant workers by allowing for the technical cooperation between Qatar and the ILO, thereby initiating labor reforms and the reformative process of the sponsorship system (Al Thani, 2021, p. 1746). In fact, global scrutiny jeopardized the 2022 World Cup by leaving a negative image and reputational damage, which the Qatari state has addressed through a PR strategy that posited the World Cup as an occasion for development and change, and through collaboration with NGOs, trade unions, and international organizations to showcase a commitment to protect workers' rights. Respecting human rights has been paramount in presenting Qatar as a credible actor on the international stage, especially with the kind of exposure that Qatar was subjected to during the preparation for the tournament.

This kind of scrutiny does not solely involve the hosting government but companies as well. Businesses have a brand through which they present themselves in the marketplace to the consumers, and human rights violations connected to a company could tarnish its reputation. For example, CH2M Hill, an American firm that was contracted by the Qatar Supreme Committee (the organizational body established in 2011 and responsible for the delivery of the required infrastructures and for overseeing the planning operations linked to the 2022 World Cup) to supervise the construction projects, went several times under scrutiny of advocacy groups (Ganji 2016, p. 242); similarly, Amnesty International in 2013 criticized SEG Construction (based in Beirut) and Krantz company (based in Florida) because of the poor treatment of their workers in Qatar, and the BBC criticized in 2014 on a similar issue the British building contractor Carillion for inadequate health and safety equipment as well as passport confiscation (Millward 2017, pp. 764-770). In this regard, a report indicates that 97% of companies consider reputational risks linked to worker abuse the key driver for a company's remedy actions on modern slavery (Theron, 2022, p. 197).

Moreover, besides the condemnations tied to the human rights abuses, Qatar has been subjected to a harsh campaign that could be labeled discriminatory and biased. On the one hand, the human rights violations have been rightly framed by Western media as a slavery issue, when at the same time, the record of other neighboring countries has been ignored, as pointed out by the statement of a Qatari official: *"I'm not saying we have the best human rights in Qatar, but we are a great deal better than Saudi or the UAE."* (Al Thani, 2021, p. 1739). Even though this statement cannot be taken at face value, it should be recognized that Qatar has been the first country in the Gulf to establish a minimum wage law, minimum allowances for food and accommodation, and to allow migrant workers' representatives in the joint committees at the workplaces (ILO, 2022, pp. 7; 14). On the other hand, this campaign has been defined as hypocritical by the Qatari government, especially in the face of similar blatant human rights violations vis-à-vis the migrant workers occurring in the Western world. For example, in 2005, around 500 Indian men were employed in the US through the government's temporary guestworker programme, the H-2B Visa Programme. It has been discovered that these workers paid exorbitant recruitment fees to obtain the job, endured racist abuses, were threatened with deportation, and were accommodated in overcrowded labor camps (LeBaron, 2020, pp. 90-91). Another example can be the research made on Mexican migrant workers in Canada, who faced several violations and abuses, such as the confiscation of their passport, lack of access to healthcare, exclusion from collective bargaining, and denial of Canadian citizenship also for those cases in which workers have spent most of their lives in Canada (Gabriel & Macdonald, 2014, p. 248). Or, again, let us take as an example the UK's domestic workers' visa system, which put migrant workers in abusive conditions and under the threat of deportation, allowing for forced domestic servitude (McQuade, 2022, p. 33). These are just a few examples to show that modern-day slavery and labor exploitation, far from exceptional, is an endemic issue that characterizes the whole global system rather than a specific issue detectable only in non-democratic non-Western countries.

As already explained, major sports events usually elicit strong international scrutiny on social or political issues, as happened in the occasion of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing and the 2012 Olympics in London (Brownell, 2012; Timms, 2012); furthermore, similar criticism can also be found during the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, 2016 Summer Olympics in Brazil, and the 2018 World Cup in Russia (Babar, 2022, p. 227). So, one could raise a question: Why was Qatar willing to host the tournament, given the harsh scrutiny and the negative reputational risks? In the previous section, I talked about foreign investments that underwent during the run-up to the tournament in the construction sector from international construction companies listed in the ITUC report (ITUC, 2015b), with an average profit margin for these infrastructure projects estimated to be between 5 and 10 percent of the project value, that is \$15 billion in profit (Ibid. p. 7). However, other aspects that have led to the hosting bid of Qatar have to be considered, namely the enhancement of soft power along with the national branding and the Qatari concurrency with the other GCC countries.

Pursuing soft power and branding aspirations

Soft power can be described as a state's ability to attract and achieve its goals by using persuasive means to gain favor from other actors. Unlike hard power, which relies on a country's economic and military power to accomplish objectives through coercive actions, soft power relies on non-coercive strategies such as cultural appeal and diplomatic efforts (Ganji, 2016, p. 239).

The pursuit of soft power is a national security strategy by Qatar. The origins of this strategy lie in Kuwait's 1990 invasion by Iraq. The event, used by other scholars to explain the exceptionalism of Kuwait (Herb, 2014, p. 63-66), demonstrated the country's exposure to external threats because of the lack of a reliable military force and geographical proximity to Iran and Iraq, and the importance of pursuing a soft power strategy to foster the national security. In this case, the factors that affected Kuwait's political considerations can be considered valid also for Qatar (Ganji, 2016, pp. 239-240). Therefore, the 2022 World Cup must be considered not only an endeavor to position Qatar as a hub for sports, entertainment, and tourism or a mechanism to attract foreign investments but also an opportunity to enhance Qatar's soft power and its agency in global affairs, in order to position itself as a leading regional and international player. That also explains another reason behind Qatar's abiding by human rights commitment: a successful World Cup was fundamental to gaining a primary position on the international stage, and human rights abuses could have put at risk this diplomatic strategy (Al Thani, 2021, p. 1736).

However, hosting the 2022 World Cup is only the last endeavor of Qatar's soft power strategy. The launching of Al Jazeera in 1996, or the establishment of Education City that promoted Qatar as a center of education and innovation, can also be seen as part of the same strategy.

The idea behind Qatar's soft power aspirations relies upon the idea of positing the country as transparent and accountable, so human rights violations could threaten Qatar of tarnishing this reputation. This rationale can be inferred in a statement released by a Qatari official working in preparation for the World Cup: *"I've seen this organisation developing how we ensure workers are protected. ... The groundwork ... was put in [when] we got to a high number of workers. I've been working on [developing these new] procedures, how the [organisation] [can] work with partners such as Building and Wood Worker's International, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Impact and more recently the International Labour Organisation since they have a presence in Qatar. We worked closely with NGOs to make sure... [the protection of] workers are, number one, appreciated ... by [the] people and number two ... we get the right help from [experts] in the field to make sure ... we do [the] right thing".* (Al Thani, 2021, p. 1741). This statement denotes an opening to dialogue and willingness to align domestic labor laws to global standards in order to appear reliable and professional and showcase change and progress; in this sense, the collaboration with international actors, from NGOs to International Organizations, and the creation of Workers' Forum under the technical cooperation with the ILO, illustrate the efforts made in this sense – engaging with workers' rights to become more internationally accountable - by the Qatari state (Ibid.).

To sum up, a poor human rights record can negatively affect the country's international reputation, that in turn would impact Qatar's soft power, which would ultimately hamper its neoliberal project. Pursuing a neoliberal development can seem at odds with any commitment to human rights. In fact, the primary concern of neoliberalism is to increase and unleash market efficiency through deregulation, the opening of the domestic market, and privatization in order to create a more attractive environment for foreign capital. A common belief that sustains this policy is the concept that the *"invisible hand"* of the market will achieve the best economic outcome in terms of efficiency, productivity, and wealth generated overall, eventually trickling down this wealth to the rest of the economy. This fairy tale has been used to justify this purely profit-driven vision, which actually helped to create the conditions for an ever-rising economic inequality within the countries and among them and furthering labor exploitation and precariousness by worsening job conditions for workers. As one of the fathers of neoliberalism, the economist Milton Friedman stated: *"There is one and only one social responsibility of business – to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits"* (LeBaron, 2020, p. 71). From this statement, we can add that the only responsibility of states is to facilitate the businesses' operations by creating a field of play that favors this trend (the creation of free trade zones, tax incentives, and the like). Economic growth and development are the primary goals of government policy, and human rights, if not outright conflicting, are subordinated to these goals. However, as I stated before, addressing human rights concerns and improving working conditions for migrant workers is a way for Qatar to enhance its reputation and present itself as a reliable business partner so that it can attract more investments and widen its international reach (Al Thani, 2021, p. 1748).

Overall, a poor human rights record can negatively affect the country's international reputation, that in turn would impact Qatar's soft power, which would ultimately hamper its neoliberal project and the ability to attract investments, tourists, and foreign talent, thereby jeopardizing the Qatar National Vision 2030 and the efforts of diversification from oil.

Competition between GCC states

The other factor to consider when dealing with Qatar and its hosting bid for the World Cup is the climate of competition among the GCC states. They all strove to position themselves in a prominent position within the global market and augment their geopolitical weight; it is a competition to establish which country could be more appealing and attract more foreign investments and tourism. Especially in the last decades, the GCC countries have been competing in several fields, ranging from architecture to infrastructure (Adham, 2008, p. 245; Ziadah, 2018). This competition went beyond the purely economic sphere and resulted in a diplomatic crisis from 2017 to 2021, whereby the other GCC members embargoed Qatar and cut diplomatic relations. However, the 2022 World Cup has been an important factor that helped to mend the political rift within the GCC. In fact, it can be argued that the two most important countries of the GCC, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, saw the economic opportunities tied to this sport event, such as hosting flights, tourism, and hospitality, and wanted a piece of the pie. Therefore, diplomatic and economic considerations drove reestablishing ties with Qatar, which showed the all-around importance of hosting the event (Dorsey & Zidan, 2023). After analyzing why Qatar wanted to host the 2022 World Cup and how it made the country vulnerable to international pressure, the next section will take the NGOs' perspective to understand why their advocacy campaigns have effectively pressured the Qatari state.

Effective advocacy campaigning

The effectiveness of any advocacy campaign rests on the ability to provide information quickly and in a strategic fashion to raise an issue and lobby organizations and governments for policy change. In the case of Qatar and the 2022 World Cup, the transnational advocacy network has been able to frame the issue of abuses on workers in terms of slavery, thereby making it understandable to the public audience in order to elicit attention and spur corrective actions. In this process, NGOs have had a fundamental role in advocacy networks in terms of conveying information and pressuring actions. They were the first organizations to produce informative reports about the abuses of migrants in Qatar immediately in the aftermath of the awarding bid in 2010.

Moreover, together with the trade unions, NGOs have been effective in pressuring international organizations and positing the migrant issue as a priority matter that needs to be dealt with. In this sense, NGOs involved in the Qatar advocacy campaign have used two tactics to pressure these actors: information politics and leverage politics. As explained above, the former is the ability to create politically usable information to have an impact. In contrast, the latter is the ability to call on influential actors to remedy situations where a network cannot be influential in and on itself and needs to involve other more influential actors (Keck et al., 1998, p. 16).

Information politics by NGOs, as already mentioned, rely upon the ability to provide information in a timely and quick fashion. However, in addition to facts, NGOs' reports also provide testimony stories by the people affected by the issue, in this case, migrant workers, framing these stories in terms of right and wrong to elicit a reaction. Nonetheless, it is important that NGOs' reports present a status quo that is not accidental but rather with a clear and identifiable culprit as well as feasible solutions. Problems labeled as structural do not lend themselves to this kind of strategy. In the case of Qatar, it is not the global supply chain and the global capitalistic model that has been favoring this systematic labor exploitation to be put under discussion, but only the specific abuses occurring along the migration corridor from Asia to Qatar. Overall, this tactic is defined as "*human rights methodology*" that promotes change by reporting facts (Ibid., p. 19; p. 27; p. 183).

On top of that, Keck and Sikkink demonstrated in their pioneering research about transnational advocacy networks that campaigns based on issues revolving around bodily harm to a swathe of populations considered vulnerable in a context in which there is a plain causal chain to attribute the responsibility, and revolving around legal equality of opportunity, are most likely to be effective (Ibid., p. 27; p. 195; p. 205). In the case of the Qatari case, these characteristics can be found, namely the bodily harm to migrant workers, as demonstrated by the reporting of abuses and deaths, a clear causal chain traced back to the Qatari state and the recruitment industry, and a legal inequality whereby worker migrants are entitled to less economic and social rights when compared to the Qatari citizens.

On the other hand, leverage politics can involve the use of material leverage, for example, the withdrawal of military or economic aid to a specific country, or moral leverage. The latter was used in the case of the advocacy campaign against Qatar and is based upon the "mobilization of shame" through international scrutiny. However, this type of action, which is distinguished by its moral character, can be effective, in other words, can pursue any policy change only when the targeted actor cares about international opinion and aspire to raise their position in the international community as a legitimate and credible player (Ibid. p. 23; p. 29); as I demonstrated in the previous two paragraphs, Qatar has all the interests to invest itself in the nurturing of this opinion and in the cultivating of its international image and its public relations.

Will the ILO/Qatar technical cooperation change the status quo?

Although the main purpose of this thesis is to answer the question of why the international pressure brought on by NGOs has been effective in spurring a policy change on behalf of the Qatari state, I think that the advertised “dismantling of the Kafala system” (ILO, 2022, p. 5) raises some important political considerations worth of attention.

First of all, I draw on the analysis of Adam Hanieh (2015) to bring some reflections. According to his analysis, human rights abuses coming from the spatial structuring of class in the Gulf, of which the Kafala is one of the main pillars, are not simply given by unaccountable governance, failure to comply with international norms, or specific interests of Gulf rulers; rather, they reflect the power balance in the world market, which is related in the US geopolitical interests in the region, and the unequal development of the Middle East, which unraveled during the neoliberal transformations of the late 20th century. Thus, his conclusion is that any endeavor of NGOs to improve the condition of migrant workers, if remains limited to the specific government legislation and fails to engage with how the power in the global economic system is designed, is condemned to fail (Hanieh, 2015, p. 72).

Let us take, for example, the spatial structuring of class as described by Hanieh. In his work, he argues that the migration to the Gulf is a process of spatialized class formation; namely, it consists of social relations emerging across different geographical spaces, from the Gulf to Southeast Asia in this case. This phenomenon makes room for exploitation through differential wages related to the cost of labor in the sending countries and through a ‘reserve army of labor’ that the Gulf can tap into (Ibid., p. 66-67). Although the reform process initiated through the technical collaboration with the ILO has brought on important steps forward regarding migrant workers’ rights, such as a minimum salary in the private sector, the possibility to change jobs without the permission of the employer, and the removal of the exit permit, measures that if systematically implemented could enhance the bargaining power of migrant workers, reduce their vulnerability, and improve the competitiveness of the Qatari economy, there are yet important loopholes that need to be addressed. In this case, although the minimum salary could potentially deal with the problem of differential wages, it does not fix the problem related to the ‘reserve army of labor.’ For example, in August 2022, the Qatari police arrested at least 60 migrant workers who protested for unpaid wages for as long as seven months in construction and hospitality ventures, deporting some of them (The Workers Rights, 2022). The threat of deportation is still one of the main problems that exacerbate the vulnerability of migrant workers in Qatar, a method used by the official authorities, as in this case, or by employers as a retaliation against those workers who want to change their job by denouncing them as absconded, in order to keep the foreign workforce acquiescent in the face of abuses. The threat of deportation exists because of a ‘reserve army of

labor' that can be tapped at any moment. This 'reserve army of labor' exists because neoliberal reforms have allowed the worsening of the economic conditions in the labor-sending countries, which in turn compel workers to migrate in order to meet their needs. In other words, if the policymaking does not address the causes that create the vulnerability of workers and the design of the international political economy and profit-driven managerial approaches that facilitate the development of competitive advantages through the exploitation of slavery and forced labor, but only the symptoms, the plights of these workers are unlikely to be fixed. Labor market migration is based upon global relations of inequality. This is the core of the problem revolving around labor exploitation, and it has not been addressed yet.

Lastly, another issue resides in the way in which remittances are considered. In 2019, remittances became the largest inflow of capital to developing countries (LeBaron, 2020, p. 97) and are now considered the most important source for these countries' economic development. This logic is entrenched in the concept of the "positive-sum game" that underlies many analyses on economic migration: labor-sending countries benefit from the remittances sent back home by their workforce employed abroad, and labor-receiving countries benefit from the availability of these workers in their economies, especially in the case of labor-poor Gulf countries. However, according to Hanieh, this logic neglects the exploitative nature of the labor-capital relation, in which wages are the symbol of the exploitation and the appropriation of surplus value by the capital, a condition inherent to the capitalist system itself. The greater the difference between the value of the work produced by employees and their wages, the greater the exploitation (Hanieh, 2013, p. 126). The billions of profits generated by the construction industry in Qatar, in the face of the minimum wage of \$275 applied to the workers employed in the private sector, give us an idea of the dimensions of the exploitation suffered by migrant workers.

Perhaps, after the reforms initiated along with the collaboration with the ILO (if effectively implemented), we cannot define the migrant workers' condition in Qatar anymore as modern slavery - it is worth mentioning that legally, slavery in Qatar was abolished in 1952 (Al-Mulla, 2017) - even though there is no international or legal definition of this term (Theron, 2022, p. 189). However, I still define their condition as one of exploitation, in which the Kafala system, or its remnants after the reforms – although it is unclear the level of implementation of these measures – is only one of the main tools that favor this systemic approach based on flexibility, profiteering and taking advantage of the vulnerable swathes of the society. In fact, as stated by the IMF regarding the economy of UAE, a country that can be compared socially and economically to Qatar, the flexible labor policy, giving access to a vast supply of labor at internationally competitive wages, has been a key factor in its competitiveness (2005, pp. 13-14). In this case, 'flexible labor policy' means a policy that allows a state to displace and relocate foreign workers accordingly to their needs, as the Kafala has been doing, and 'internationally competitive wages' means low wages.

Unfortunately, as explained in the previous section, the global capitalistic model and the global supply chain are systemic and have a muddy causal chain assigning responsibility, which, in turn, are hardly amenable to any advocacy network strategy (Keck et al, 1998, p. 27).

7. Conclusions

The thesis dealt with the international pressure brought by international advocacy groups throughout the period of the run-up to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, which began in 2010 with the awarding of the bid by FIFA. Initiated with a comprehensive literature review on the factors contributing to the endurance of the Kafala system, this study aimed to explore the underlying reasons for Qatar's susceptibility to twelve-year advocacy campaigns. It sought to understand why these campaigns were successful in pressuring Qatar into implementing substantial reforms in labor and migration laws. Although a variety of different reasons played a role in this dynamic, ranging from the international attention brought by a major sport event such as the World Cup of football to the tireless twelve-year advocacy work carried out by international advocacy groups, the thesis found in the neoliberal trajectory of Qatar the most important factor that contributed to making Qatar vulnerable to this type of pressure. As I tried to explain in the last chapter, pursuing a neoliberal development can seem at odds with any commitment to human rights. Nonetheless, the thesis tried to demonstrate how a poor human rights record can negatively affect the country's international reputation, that in turn would impact Qatar's soft power, which would ultimately hamper its neoliberal project.

The first chapter depicts the Qatari background. It describes the characteristics of the Qatari economy and labor market, the functioning of the Kafala system and its engendered abuses on migrant workers, the reaction of the transnational advocacy networks, and the Technical Cooperation Programme between Qatar and ILO that started in 2018. Once the background was given, the second chapter delved into the migration corridor from South and Southeast Asia to the Gulf, particularly Qatar. It has done that by describing the recruitment process in the labor-sending countries in Asia and the type of migration governance affecting this corridor. Moreover, it gave a context to the role played by NGOs in this framework, firstly locating them within this governance and then describing their work of international pressure in practice. Finally, the last chapter, once it introduced the characteristics of the Qatari neoliberal project, focused on the side effects of this political trend and how they compelled Qatar to show commitment to solving the human rights abuses and being open to dialogue and engagement with NGOs and international organizations. It also described the reasons that spurred Qatar to host the 2022 World Cup, although the risk of being espoused to harsh international scrutiny. In this regard, the pursuit of soft power, branding aspirations, and competition among the GCC states have been found as some of the most important factors. Instead, the last part of the chapter, after some considerations about the characteristics that make an advocacy campaign effective, focused on some considerations regarding the effectiveness of the reforms, arguing that if the global labor system is not reformed, these reforms are unlikely to bring some real change to migrant workers.

Another important consideration I tried to state throughout the thesis is the importance of not falling into Orientalist, Islamophobic, or racist depictions to explain the workers' grievances in Qatar. The abuses vis-à-vis the migrant workers are not an exceptional trait of the GCC states. Rather, they are a worldwide characteristic backing the capitalist form of the relation between the capital and the workforce in the Global South as well as the Global North. The guest-workers programs all over the world are a clear example of it.

The ultimate goal of Qatar, as stated in the Qatar National Vision 2030, is to become a knowledge-based economy and attract talented workers in a neoliberal fashion. The thesis considers the reforms as an act of recognition that to carry on neoliberal policies, become global, be a primary actor on the international stage, and be accepted by the mainstream, it was fundamental to concede this kind of political opening. The point is not so much the protection of migrant workers as the possibility of keeping this political-economical trajectory and keeping in place a labor supply chain that continues to allow the exploitation of workers in favor of the growth of the capital. The system remains unaffected. The reforms have served to give a veneer of legitimacy by paying lip service to internationally shared norms and staving off criticism, especially during the period of greatest international attention Qatar has ever had in its short history as a nation-state. The point is that Qatar does not have much other incentive to pursue these reforms once the eye of the storm has passed. This consideration also casts fairly pessimistic lights on Qatar's actual willingness to make the reforms effective, oversee them, and pursue them organically. A working-class with more rights is not something desirable to the Gulf capital, especially mindful of the problems it had with workers' revolts up to the 1970s. The goal is to have an enslaved working class with few rights, detached from the rest of society, and flexible to the needs of capital.

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