

Welcome to Qatar, the most controversial World Cup host ever

2022 World Cup: Should this even be taking place in Qatar?

DOHA, Qatar — The bone-weary workers hide from blazing mid-afternoon sun in shaded alleys, or stretched across the front seats of cars outside gated homes. They sink back onto strips of cardboard, their makeshift beds for sidewalk naps. They wipe away sandy sweat, the remnants of long days spent beautifying this complicated city. They've transformed it into a World Cup host. And yet, to the wealthy sheikhs who allegedly bought this World Cup, they are invisible.

Millions of them, migrants from some of Earth's poorest countries, have come and gone over the past 12 years to enable a show that begins Sunday. They've come from Nepal to work in construction, from Uganda to work in transportation, from Kenya to work in security, from India to bag groceries. They have been systemically abused by a country that could pay them limitlessly but in reality pays very little. They are the backbone of Qatar, some 89% of its population, and the reason this World Cup *can* happen — but not the reason it is happening.

They built the intersecting highways and gleaming, efficient metro; the skyscrapers and upscale hotels; and the stadiums, which seem to be everywhere. They've dressed up Doha's towering West Bay with the glitz of global soccer, and installed the banners, flags and colorful signage that have given monochromatic suburban districts some life. There are still empty, dusty lots on every other corner and construction cranes looming on the horizon. But most critical work is done. The project is nearly complete. Qatar, a tiny peninsular emirate that juts out into the Persian Gulf, is prepared to host and play in the planet's grandest sporting event. It is prepared to show off a superficially shiny face to a million visitors and billions of people watching around the globe.

Beneath the surface, however, lies the extreme inequality that spotlights have found — and that has made this the most controversial World Cup ever.

The scandal at the heart of it is that the impoverished people who built it are precisely the ones who won't benefit from it. As soccer teams arrive and train, a throng of workers in blue body suits and neon vests piles into a van on The Pearl, and likely rumbles back to a labor camp on the outskirts of the city. Qatar will argue that they've indirectly benefited from the World Cup, via legal reforms accelerated by international spotlights. But they still live at the bottom of a racialized social hierarchy that entices them with money but treats them as replaceable cogs in a massive geopolitical machine.

They are humans, and when you treat them as such, most will smile back at you through life's struggles. But the entire point of this World Cup — the who, what, where and why — has not been humanity; it has been to elevate a rail-thin sliver of humanity, and a single faceless, filthy-rich, searing, mispronounced, enigmatic entity called Qatar.

“For Qatar, it's not just about a football tournament,” Nasser Al Khater, the Qatari World Cup organizing committee chief, told Yahoo Sports in an interview. “It's really about nation building.”

Qatar's World Cup: An 'instrument of soft power'

A century ago, Qatar was a British protectorate home to 20,000 people. It was a desert where nothing could grow and nobody wanted to go. It was desolate and poor. Then, in 1939, it found oil. It later discovered a massive offshore gas field, by far the largest in the world. It began drilling, liquefying and exporting — and profiting.

By the turn of the century, Qatar had limitless money, but no foothold in the power structure of the world. So it set out to gain one, in part through sport. It sunk money into European soccer, via PSG, sponsorships and BeIN Sports. It bid for world championships in track and gymnastics. But the crown jewel, of course, the one that packed the most soft power, was FIFA's World Cup.

The grand plan was mythically hatched at a private dinner in 2007, with then-FIFA president Sepp Blatter initially proposing it to Qatar's former emir. The emirate, then home to some 1.5 million people, officially launched its bid in 2009, and “in line with Qatar's national development strategy,” as a FIFA evaluation document stated. That evaluation report spoke of “risk” and “logistical challenges.” Everybody involved, though, knew that this was not a game of operational merit, but rather one of politics.

What followed in 2010 has since been the subject of investigations by journalists and U.S. prosecutors. It triggered an FBI probe that led to dramatic stroke-of-dawn arrests. At least three members of the 24-person executive committee that awarded the 2022 World Cup to Qatar “were offered and received bribe payments in exchange for their votes,” according to a U.S. Department of Justice indictment. In total, 18 of the 24 — including two who were barred *before* the December 2010 decision because they'd already been caught selling their votes — have been implicated in or investigated for some form of illicit activity.

The many investigations into alleged corruption, which Qatari officials have repeatedly denied, have failed to find the proverbial smoking gun, the definitive proof that this World Cup was totally bought. The tournament, though, has been trailed by an *assumption* of corruption, which is fueled in part by Western biases, in part by actual evidence, and in part by the apparent illogic of a World Cup in a miniscule, dangerously hot country with little domestic soccer culture.

Those assumptions, and Qatar's various other flaws, led prominent figures in and outside of the sport to call on FIFA to strip Qatar of Qatar 2022.

Qatar, amid the uproar, reportedly commissioned a covert spying operation, dubbed “Project Merciless,” to “protect the interests of Q22.”

The World Cup had, by then, become a critical “instrument of soft power,” as Simon Chadwick, a professor of sport and geopolitical economy at the SKEMA Business School in France, wrote in a recent report. It was and is “a means through which to boost the country's attractiveness and convince key target audiences that the country shares similar values and aspirations to them.” It was going to happen — it *had* to happen — at any and all costs.

Oh, and Qatar was going to play in it — which was another opportunity for good publicity, but also a problem.

The harsh divide between Qatar and its national soccer team

Around the turn of the century, Qatar had attempted to build competitive sports teams by importing talent. It fielded Bulgarian weightlifters and Kenyan runners, and tried to field Brazilian footballers — which led FIFA to change its eligibility rules. Since 2004, soccer players have had to be born in, have roots in, or have lived for five years in the country they wish to represent. So, with imports disallowed, Qatar turned to an unfamiliar option, domestic manufacturing.

In 2004, by emir decree, Qatar founded the Aspire Academy, a state-of-the-art national sports school meticulously designed to produce pro athletes. Its vast dome, the largest of its kind, houses a FIFA-approved soccer pitch (in addition to several outdoors), a dozen other Olympic-quality sports facilities, classrooms and fancy residences. Its scouts hop around the Connecticut-sized country, screening a majority of the roughly 7,000 Qatari boys who play organized soccer, at ages as young as 6 or 7, according to reports. The best get plucked off their local teams as pre-teens and placed in the Academy, where they train under experienced European coaches, learn on scholarship, and get every chance imaginable to ascend to the men's national team.

They are there because, for much of last decade and as late as 2017, Qatar hovered around No. 100 in the men's FIFA rankings. Its professional clubs weren't producing enough top players. So the government paid a bunch of Spaniards, Germans, Brits and Eastern Europeans to do the work instead. They paid performance coaches and data analysts. The World Cup loomed, and they needed to avoid embarrassment.

Finally, with a few years to go, the multi-billion-dollar project began to bear fruit. With seven Aspire graduates in its starting 11, Qatar stunned Japan to win the 2019 Asian Cup. It performed admirably as guests at the 2021 Gold Cup as well. It climbed into the world's top 50, with hopes of a respectable World Cup showing that won't mar the broader show.

But there remains an uncomfortable dichotomy between the team and the country it stands for. The team has embraced and naturalized immigrants and the sons of immigrants, including its Sudanese-born star, Almoez Ali. The country, on the contrary, makes it nearly impossible for immigrants and the children of immigrants to gain citizenship and all the lavish benefits it confers.

That exclusivity ingrains what the United Nations Special Rapporteur on racism called a “de facto caste system based on national origin,” which “results in structural discrimination against non-citizens.” Many of the 11%, privileged by nationality alone, live lives of unconstrained consumption and leisure. They fly falcons, race cars and employ maids. They get land, loans and desirable jobs. They're the ones, for the most part, who'll sport maroon and white on Sunday (11 a.m. ET, FS1) when their team kicks off the 2022 World Cup, while the South Asians who built it wind down a taxing day or ready themselves for another one.

Inequality is not an exclusively Qatari problem, of course, nor is this the first mega-event constructed for the upper class by an underclass. It is stark in the United States as well, and worsening.

But it's particularly striking here.

"For many in Qatar," the UN Special Rapporteur said, "national origin and nationality determines the extent of their enjoyment of their human rights."

The two faces of Qatar

There is a version of Qatar that, in some ways, is a vibrant melting pot of cultures. It's the weekend-morning cricket games and the hole-in-the-wall ethnic cafés. It's the mishmash of languages overheard on the metro. It's the communities that coalesce around the need for comfort far away from home. It's the hundreds of thousands of migrants who have, in fact, sought and found a better life here.

But then there is Qatar the monolith, the deeply patriarchal society that marginalizes LGBTQ people, the autocratic monarchy that curbs freedom of expression and, until recently, all but legalized the abuse of those migrants.

This whole World Cup, all \$200-plus billion of it, looks and feels like an advertisement for *that* Qatar.

That Qatar is the one that has hired layer upon layer of PR firms to burnish its public image. It has offered expenses-paid trips to journalists in implicit exchange for flowery articles, and to fans on the explicit condition of restricted speech. It has used former soccer superstars, including David Beckham, to sell this World Cup. FIFA and the organizing committee, meanwhile, have invited migrant workers to fraternize with players, a goodwill gesture doubly designed for cameras, to disproportionately wash over ills.

That is the Qatar that advised construction companies to halt projects during the World Cup, and to "plan for workers' leave which maximizes the reduction in the number of workers in the country during the period."

That is the Qatar that is shutting down schools, and recommending work from home, to open up Doha's streets to tourists.

It is all part of a grand, sometimes inhumane plan to diversify the national economy and entrench prosperity. The unprecedented criticism it's drawn has stung, but seems to have left the Qataris undeterred.

"I wouldn't be surprised [if] decades from now, Qatar will aim to host the World Cup again," Al Khater, the organizing committee chief, told Al Jazeera.

"I think Qatar will be a sporting hub," he told Yahoo Sports. "I think Qatar will continue bidding for mega-events. ... Will we see another attempt at an Olympic bid? We'll have to wait and see."

Same goes for all the prophesized legacies of this World Cup, the promises of carbon neutrality and further labor reforms. Why, rights advocates wonder, was a World Cup necessary to instigate them, and what will happen to them when it goes away? What will Qatar turn into?

We'll have to wait and see.

In the meantime, with a few days till kickoff, endless streams of white cars rumble down highways. Stray cats wander across quieter streets. Talabat bikers, the Qatari equivalent of Doordashers, whiz past with

packs of food digging into their backs.

Outside a palatial mall with fake sky, ride-share drivers prepare for a prodigious World Cup influx.

At metro stops, attendants herd droves of visitors into proper entry lanes.

Out in the open, a prayer call wafts over the entire city.

And the sidewalk nappers, still weary, perhaps always weary, lift themselves for another few hours of work.