

International Media Pressure and Labor Migration Policy Reform in Authoritarian Regimes

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Abstract. This paper aims to investigate the causal relationship between international media pressure and labor migration policy reform in authoritarian states. It hypothesizes that a higher level of international media pressure increases the intensity of policy reform to improve migrant conditions. The paper uses a comparison of three Gulf states' cases under different reputational pressures, including Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Kuwait. Findings suggest that Qatar, under intense global scrutiny during the preparation of the FIFA World Cup, implemented notable policy reform. UAE implements a partial adjustment. Kuwait, with limited international scrutiny, largely resists the policy reform. The case study suggests that despite all three regimes being structurally similar in their regimes and dependency on migrant worker, their depth of policy reform varies accordingly with their exposure to international media pressure. Global media pressure drives authoritarian regimes to implement labor reform as a symbolic move to secure their international legitimacy.

Keywords: International media pressure; labor migration; authoritarian regimes.

1. Introduction

International media pressure refers to external force, including global media coverage, NGO advocacy, and international scrutiny that potentially influence states' internal policy reform. The influence of international media pressure on domestic policy change in authoritarian states can be analyzed through several theoretical frameworks. One of the foundation lenses is "transnational advocacy networks," introduced by Keck and Sikkink. Authors describe transnational advocacy networks as a coalition that comprises relevant nonstate actors, including NGOs and international organizations; these actors amplify their influence by strategically mobilize information to draw public attention and leverage pressure over powerful institutions [1].

Additionally, Finnemore and Sikkink's theory of "international norm dynamics" offers a valuable insight into how international labor norms can influence domestic policy reform. Authors explain the evolution of norms through states of emergence, cascade, and internalization, which suggests that states may gradually embed norms within their domestic political systems. During the norm cascade stage, states "adhere to international norms" because fear of being labeled as "rogue state" during international interaction and wants to maintain their international legitimation" [2].

Triadafilopoulos' "migration-membership dilemma" has also been instructive in explaining this causality. Through examining the evolution of immigration policies between Canada and Germany, both countries initially limited cultural diversity, ultimately transformed to inclusive policies due to changes in the global normative context triggered by events including decolonization and the Holocaust. This shift demonstrates that external moral pressure can erode the domestic legitimacy of exclusionary policies, compelling political elites to realign with international norms [3].

This paper builds on these existing theories to investigate the causality relationship of why different intensity of international media pressures leads to labor migration policy reform at different levels. While the existing literature provided a solid framework explaining how authoritarian regimes respond to international pressure, this paper aims to push this framework further by examining specific cases' responses to international pressure resulting in different labor migration policy reforms.

2. Methodology

2.1. Sample Selection

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states extensively rely on migrant foreign workers, who often outnumber citizens within the domestic workforce. To manage this dependency, the governments of the GCC have implemented a restrictive labour migration policy that aims to maintain migrant workers as a temporary workforce by excluding them from political power and legal protections. One of the foundations of the labour migration policy of GCC states was the Kafala (sponsorship) system from 1950. The system legally ties the migrant workers' residency and employment status to specific employers, limiting labour mobility and requiring employers' explicit consent for entering the labour market or remaining within the country. Furthermore, exit permit required formal approval from their employer in order to leave the country, which severely limits freedom of movement. Moreover, the Kafala system restricts the transfer of employment to a new sponsor without a No Objection Certificate (NOC) from the current sponsor. Additionally, the system also imposes a barrier, causing GCC states to have no independent pathway for permanent residency or family reunion, with workers who lose their sponsorship must immediately leave the country. While the majority of GCC countries announce their policy reform, the extent of their reform varies extensively between states, which creates an ideal institutional environment to analyze their differences [4,5].

2.2. Methodology

This paper employs a comparative case study to examine the impact of international media pressure on labor migration policy reform. The cases selected are three states of GCC states, including Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait. The selected cases share structural similarity, including authoritarian governance, economic structure, cultural context, and heavy reliance on migrant labour [5]. Simultaneously, these countries also receive distinctive international media pressure. Through relatively constant control factors and differences in the independent variable, the study aims to minimize omitted variable bias and focus on causality between international media pressure and labor migration policy reform.

The independent variable is international media pressure that refers to the extent of a regime under international scrutiny and media advocacy regarding its labor practices. This includes global media coverage, NGO advocacy, and international scrutiny resulting from hosting major international events. To measure the independent variable, this paper employs a combination method of combining qualitative and quantitative data that has been inspired by a peer-reviewed article. In this article, the author uses the Factiva database to assess the media exposure level. This paper plans to use a similar method by entering specific keywords relevant to the topic and using Factiva to aggregate press across international media outlets [6]. Additionally, qualitative analysis will be conducted through NGO reports and the tone of influential international media coverage. The independent variable of each case will be evaluated using the same criteria.

The dependent variable is labor migration policy reform, which refers to changes in the legal and regulatory framework aimed at improving foreign workers' working conditions and rights protection. This includes the reform of the old sponsorship model and the introduction of new labor protection policies. To measure the dependent variable, a qualitative analysis of official government legislation and international organization reports will be employed.

Table 1 summarizes the quantitative data gathered to assess the international media pressure. The data is based on three dimensions. The International Media Coverage is measured through article keyword searches on the Factiva news database with a date range set from January 1, 2015, to January 1, 2025. All cases have been conducted with the same combination of keywords, including "migrant workers", "Kafala system", and "labor abuse". The NGO scrutiny is measured through the number of human critical reports from NGOs that can be obtained in a search engine, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. A pressure tier is then assigned to each case accordingly based on

its total reputational exposure. Qatar emerged as “high pressure” due to its significantly higher media coverage and hosting an influential global event. UAE was categorized as “moderate pressure”, and Kuwait was categorized as “low pressure” cases due to their lower level of international scrutiny and more limited event exposure.

Table 1 The quantitative data gathered to assess the international media pressure

Country	Media Coverage	NGO Scrutiny	Global Event Exposure	Pressure Tier
Qatar	16,275 Articles	3020 HRW + 2,500 Amnesty	FIFA World Cup	High Pressure
UAE	3,128 Articles	2,470 HRW + 424 Amnesty	COP28 and Expo 2020	Moderate Pressure
Kuwait	2,831 Articles	2,100 HRW +318 Amnesty	No Equivalent Event	Low Pressure

3. Results

3.1. Qatar

3.1.1 Level of International Media Pressure

Qatar’s position as the host country of the 2022 FIFA World Cup placed it under intense international media pressure for its treatment of migrant workers, which triggered a global outrage of media campaigns. Based on the media coverage count measure through Factiva, the document count aims to expose Qatar’s exploitative working conditions spikes from 974 in the year 2020 to 7,698 in 2022, and back to 984 documents in 2023 that coincide with the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

CNN’s 2021 investigation report exemplifies the media coverage, calling Qatar’s World Cup “a grand project that comes with a stark human cost”. These critical global narratives have been accompanied by an astonishing number, a Guardian report that since the country gained hosting rights, an estimated over 6500 migrant workers had died in Qatar. The news also quotes a Nepal human rights lawyer calling the World Cup a “bloody cup from the blood of migrant workers”, which emphasizes its exploitative nature. These critiques of content collectively demonstrate the potential for intense global media pressure against Qatar [7].

3.1.2 Labor Migration Policy Reform

Qatar implemented a series of extensive labor migration policy reforms to address the criticism. The most essential labor reform Qatar has implemented was to partially dismantle the notorious kafala system that enables continued exploitation of migrant workers. In 2019, Qatar completely abolished the requirement of “no objection certificate (NOC) from current employer before switching job”. In 2020, Qatar announced its abolishment of other parts of the Kafala system, including the “exit visa requirement”, and enabled migrant workers to leave Qatar without the employer’s permission. Other notable progress has also been made in the Qatar labor market, as Qatar introduced Wage Protection System that mandatory transfer of payment to employers’ bank account ensures the delivery of their wages, and introduced a regional revolutionary “non-discriminatory minimum wage of USD 275 per month”. The policy reform requires employers to provide food and accommodation, which further ensures the working conditions of migrant workers. Qatar also signed a cooperation agreement with the ILO in 2023 aims to support and monitor their comprehensive labour reform.

Despite extensive reform, Qatar’s labour policy still has a very limited formal pathway to status and residency. If a worker loses their employment status, they have been offered 90 days to find new employment or face a prison sentence. In 2018, Qatar introduced a pathway to a permanent residency permit that excludes the majority of labour migrant workers with a very limited scheme of 100 permits annually, with a sufficiently high-income threshold. For family reunification, a similar constraint of

1100 USD (4000 Qatar Rials) monthly salary threshold is required. These policies underscore that Qatar's labour migration regime fundamentally maintains labour as a temporary labor force.

3.2. UAE

3.2.1 Level of International Media Pressure

UAE's international reputation pressure is relatively moderate, with less media coverage revealed by Factiva. The document count of the UAE almost doubled from 211 in 2019 to 397 in 2020, remained above 400 annually until 2022, and then declined to 284 in 2024. This trend has been potentially caused by the UAE hosting two major global events during this period. Expo 2020 is a major global event with 192 countries participating. However, the high global attention also exposes the UAE's failure to protect migrant workers during the preparation of Expo, which directly causes the UAE's global media pressure. Similarly, COP28, as an UN climate summit, also carries the goal of justice and equity that contradict labour rights abuse and drew media attention. However, the media attention drawn by these events is relatively less compared to the FIFA World Cup.

The Human Rights Watch released a report on the UAE's migrant labor, exemplifying the media criticism of the UAE. The report directly criticizes the UAE for putting migrant workers at risk due to extreme heat condition. While the widespread labor abuse has also been mentioned, including wage deduction and hidden recruitment fees. As the UAE plans to host the COP28, the report advocates for governments and other international institutions to "pressure the UAE to strengthen their labor protections for migrant workers" [8,9].

3.2.2 Labor Migrant Policy Reform

UAE's labor migration reform is relatively moderate, with less international media pressure. UAE also implemented partial reform for its Kafala system, which includes removing the need for NOC from the previous employer when the worker's contract ended. However, workers still need the employer's permission of a NOC if there is an existing contract. Additionally, the UAE also abolishes the exit permission requirement for allowing workers to leave the country. Similarly, the UAE introduced WPS that requires "payment of wage by bank transfer" to verify the payment has been paid to the employee based on the contract. The policy reform also cooperates with the ILO in 2023 for collaboration in labor inspection and protection of workers' rights. However, the UAE hasn't imposed a "minimum wage salary" for migrant workers.

Despite the UAE recently diversifying its migrant worker visa scheme, its mainstream sponsorship system still limits the pathway to residency and status to a great extent. The migrant workers who lose their jobs are granted a different grace period up to 180 days to secure new employment, "depending on their residence categories". While the UAE also offers alternatives to the Kafala system, including a 5-year green visa and 10-year gold visa, these are limited to high-income earners with annual salaries of at least 98,000 USD (AED 360000) or high-skilled professionals in specific industries, which excludes most low-wage migrant workers. For family reunification, a worker must earn a monthly minimum of 817 USD (AED 3,000) with provided housing or 1100 USD (AED 4,000) without housing. These policies reflect privileges that have been offered to attract high-skilled and high-income residents while preserving border labour as a temporary workforce.

3.3. Kuwait

3.3.1 Level of International Media Pressure

Kuwait's international media pressure is relatively small. Factiva data reveals 2831 media documents on the mistreatment of Kuwait's migrant workers from 2015 to 2025. Notable sharp increases happened in 2017, with the document count increasing from 355 to 421, and in 2020, with the document count increasing from 175 to 394. Instead of hosting an influential event, Kuwait's increase in media exposure is more likely to be caused by regional dynamics. In 2017, Qatar signed a cooperation agreement with the ILO, which drew broader scrutiny toward other GCC states as

international media believe “the kafala system is Gulf-wide”. In 2020, COVID-19 brought the migrant labour working conditions throughout GCC states under intense international attention collectively due to their overcrowded living conditions during the pandemic. Thus, unlike Qatar and the UAE, Kuwait’s international media exposure is less direct and intensive.

Content analysis of media sources further supports this regional framing. For many of the existing news coverage about Kuwait’s migration labor problem does not focus solely on Kuwait but rather treats it as a portion of the GCC region. For example, a Guardian’s news report “domestic worker under Kafala system” uses Kuwait as one of the examples within the broader collective GCC region. This potentially emphasizes that Kuwait experienced less international attention and reputational pressure despite having the same issue. Additionally, some news coverage directly talking about Kuwait tends to overemphasize its surface-level improvement, like “paid leave for domestic workers”, while barely exposing the systematic exploitation of foreign migrant workers.

3.3.2 Labor Migrant Policy Reform

Kuwait’s labor migrant policy reform is largely stagnant, with minimal incentive to undergo dramatic reform compared with its counterparts. Although Kuwait was one of the earliest GCC countries announcing its intention to reform the Kafala system, meaningful progress has been minimal. Currently, all temporary contract workers in Kuwait are still tied to the Kafala system without freedom to change jobs or leave the country. A law obligation still requires “foreign domestic workers who travel outside Kuwait without the employer’s consent must return to Kuwait unless they receive approval from the government”. Kuwait also approaches a wage protection system through “setting a minimum wage of 198 USD per month”. Overall, the policy reform of Kuwait is very fragmented, with the Kafala system continuing to play a key role in migrant labor exploitation. In recent years, ILO has collaborated with the Kuwait government on providing an assessment system; however, there isn’t any form of formal agreement or partnership been signed to formalize the institutional reform.

Kuwait’s pathway to residency and status is also the most limited one. The migrant workers who lose their employment status cannot exceed 180 days to secure another permit, or may face imprisonment for overstaying. Kuwait does not offer any permanent residence or status pathway for migrant workers. The family reunification is also under strict barriers with a minimum wage of 2600 USD (KD 800) per month. These policies reflect Kuwait’s policy mechanism to maintain almost all migrant workers as temporary workers.

4. Discussion

The case studies of Qatar, UAE, and Kuwait demonstrate a causal relationship between international media pressure and labor migration reform, which confirms the hypothesis.

Qatar stands as the clearest example with the most intense international media pressure from extensive hostile criticism on media coverage directly led to the most significant policy reform. Qatar undergoes key reforms, including partial abolishment of the Kafala System, abolishment of NOC, enforcement of minimum wage, and a transparent payment system. Through the lens of international norm dynamics, Qatar’s extensive policy reform can be understood as a norm cascade stage, when states comply with norms because of international legitimacy. Due to hosting a global event drawing significant international attention to its unethical policies, Qatar has a stronger incentive to implement its comprehensive policy reform as a symbolic strategic move to regain its legitimacy. It’s also important to note that all of Qatar’s extensive reforms are carefully selected with the highest global visibility, while none of these reforms challenge the exclusion of migrant workers from long-term integration and a pathway to residency. This reinforces the argument that reform was driven by reputational concerns. Political elites believed the political benefits of reducing reputational risk associated with this heavily invested event are greater than the economic costs of implementing a symbolic policy reform.

The UAE acts as a case for a country experiencing moderate international pressure with much fewer international media coverage and NGOs' reports. Thus, the UAE potentially has less incentive to implement the costly comprehensive reform that lowers its economic competitiveness but still needs to undergo moderate reform for the symbolic move. Compared with Qatar, the UAE implements key changes, including partial relaxation of the "Kafala system and wage protection". However, it fails to completely abolish NOC and set a minimum wage as Qatar did. Additionally, the UAE's introduction of green and gold visas reflects a policy design that prioritizes long-term stay of high-skilled, high-income labour, while aligning with the temporary stay of low-wage labour. These policies still reflect the strategic move of the UAE to maintain its control over migrant workers while improving its legitimacy to align with international norms under moderate international pressure.

Kuwait acts as a case for minimum international media pressure and implements the least policy reform. Without global visibility to incentivize need to increase its legitimacy, Kuwait's migrant labor policy remains largely unchanged. As its Kafala system is still operating with only fragmented policy reform. Their lack of a meaningful pathway to status and residency ensures migrant workers remain temporary and vulnerable. From the lens of transnational advocacy networks, Kuwait's case lacks advocacy networks that draw public attention. Without the necessary international attention, Kuwait has very limited incentive to result in a change in policy reform that potentially lowers its economic gain and loss of control over migrant workers.

5. Summary

In conclusion, this paper argues that international media pressure is a fundamental cause for labor migration policy reform in authoritarian states. As media coverage and NGO reports directly influence the legitimacy of the state, increased reputational pressure enhances the willingness for the state to implement reform to restore its legitimacy. However, this paper also acknowledges that intervention from international organizations and bilateral labour agreements may drive labour rights reform, but this paper argues their influence is contingent on prior international media attention. Without effective international attention to threaten a state's legitimacy, political elites are unlikely to allow organizations to intervene within domestic affairs. Thus, international media pressure is the most essential driving force that leads to substantial reform.

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