

ADVERTISEMENT

**The  
Economist**[Subscribe](#)[☰ Menu](#)

## Middle East & Africa

May 8th 2021 edition

**Free to quit, at last**

# Foreign workers in Qatar get some basic rights

An abusive system is being reformed





Getty Images

May 8th 2021



**I**N MOST COUNTRIES a worker's best bargaining tool is the ability to say: "Take this job and shove it." Knowing staff can go elsewhere gives employers an incentive to treat them well. But foreign workers in Qatar have long lacked this basic freedom. Under the emirate's *kafala* system, their visas were linked to specific employers: if they wanted to change jobs (or leave the country), they needed their boss's permission. So the boss could abuse them with near-impunity.

But things are changing for the gas-rich emirate's 2m migrant workers, who are 95% of its labour force. Legions of Indians and Pakistanis mop floors, chop onions and lay bricks. The *kafala* system kept their wages low. That made it cheaper for Qatar to build new stadiums for the football World Cup, which it



THE ECONOMIST TODAY

## Hand-picked stories, in your inbox

A daily email with the best of our journalism

[Sign up](#)

### More from Middle East & Africa



Alamy

### Out of the rubble

## Somaliland, an unrecognised state, is winning friends abroad

### Fire escape

**Donors make it harder for Africans to avoid deadly wood smoke**



The Economist/O.A

### Home brewing

**Covid-19 has exposed Africa's dependence on vaccines from abroad**





Getty Images

**Subscribe****Group subscriptions****Reuse our content****Help and contact us****Keep updated**

Published since September 1843 to take part in “*a severe contest between intelligence, which presses forward, and an unworthy, timid ignorance obstructing our progress.*”

**The Economist**[About](#)[Advertise](#)[Press centre](#)**The Economist Group**[The Economist Group](#)[The Economist Intelligence Unit](#)[The Economist Events](#)[The Economist Store](#)[Careers](#)[Which MBA?](#)[GMAT Tutor](#)[GRE Tutor](#)[Executive Jobs](#)[Executive Education Navigator](#)[Executive Education](#)

[Terms of Use](#) [Privacy](#) [Cookie Policy](#) [Manage Cookies](#) [Accessibility](#) [Modern Slavery Statement](#)

[Do Not Sell My Personal Information](#)  
Copyright © The Economist Newspaper Limited 2021. All rights reserved.