



Saudi Arabia Under ILO Scrutiny: Is History Repeating Itself?

Written by Aisha Mohammad

Edited by Shadan Jagersma, final editing by Josephina Trebing

Abstract

This blog examines whether Saudi Arabia's recent labour reforms are sufficient, as a matter of international labour law, to address continuing concerns regarding the treatment of migrant workers in the lead-up to the 2034 FIFA World Cup. It focuses on Saudi Arabia's 2021 Labour Reform Initiative, its obligations under the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), and the significance of the ongoing proceedings before the International Labour Organization (ILO). Drawing on the documented experience of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, where similar failures to protect migrant workers resulted in systematic abuse, the blog considers whether Saudi Arabia risks repeating that precedent in the lead-up to 2034. It argues that the central legal issue lies in the effective implementation of these reforms in practice, rather than their mere existence in formal legislative terms.

Key words: International Labour Law, ILO, forced labour, Saudi Arabia, kafala system, migrant workers, FIFA World Cup 2034

Introduction

On 4 June 2025, workers' delegates from 36 countries invoked Article 26 of the ILO Constitution, one of the organisation's most serious supervisory mechanisms, and filed a formal complaint against the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), alleging persistent and serious violations of international labour standards, particularly in relation to migrant workers. The complaint concerns alleged non-observance of the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), the Protection of Wages Convention, 1949 (No. 95), and the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111).¹ Saudi Arabia has ratified Conventions Nos 29 and 111 (in force since 1979) and Convention No. 95 (in force since 2021). The complaint additionally

¹ International Labour Organization Governing Body, *Reports of the Officers of the Governing Body: First report – Complaint submitted under article 26 of the ILO Constitution alleging non-observance by Saudi Arabia of Conventions Nos 29, 95, 111, 143 and 155*, 355th Session (Geneva, 17–27 November 2025) (26 November 2025) <https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-11/GB355-INS-17-1-%5BNORMES-251001-002%5D-EN.pdf> accessed 16 April 2026.



references Conventions Nos. 143 and 155; however, given Saudi Arabia's non-ratification of these instruments, the ILO Governing Body determined them to be not receivable.²

The complaint arises within the broader context of Saudi Arabia's designation as host nation for the 2034 FIFA World Cup, an event expected to generate substantial demand for migrant labour, and which has correspondingly intensified international scrutiny of the Kingdom's labour governance framework.³ This scrutiny is heightened by the experience of neighbouring country Qatar during the 2022 FIFA World Cup, where analogous deficiencies in the protection of migrant workers resulted in systematic abuses, including unexplained deaths and widespread wage theft. Whilst these violations ultimately prompted ILO intervention and a series of legislative reforms, research conducted by Human Rights Watch indicates that such measures were both temporally belated and structurally insufficient in scope, introduced only after substantial harm had already occurred.⁴ It is against this documented precedent, and in light of the structural parallels between the Qatari and Saudi labour governance frameworks, that this blog examines whether Saudi Arabia's recent legislative reforms are adequate as a matter of international labour law, or whether the conditions are once again in place for a pattern of migrant worker exploitation to recur at scale. International practice has long recognised that treaty compliance demands more than formal legislative reform; it requires demonstrable effectiveness in practice.⁵

The Labour Reform Initiative: Legislative Architecture and Its Limitations

Saudi Arabia's Labour Reform Initiative of 2021 signals a discernible commitment to the progressive development of workers' rights within the Kingdom's legal framework. In May of that year, Saudi Arabia ratified the 2014 Protocol to the Forced Labour Convention 1930. The Protocol is a legally-binding instrument that requires States to take measures regarding prevention, protection and remedy in giving effect to the Convention's obligation to suppress forced labour.⁶

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Human Rights Watch, 'Saudi Arabia: ILO Forced Labour Complaint a Wake-Up Call' (5 June 2024)

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/06/05/saudi-arabia-ilo-forced-labor-complaint-wake-call> accessed 16 April 2026.

⁵ ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations, *Eradication of Forced Labour: General Survey Concerning the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No 29) and the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No 105)*, Report III (Part 1B), ILC 96th Session (ILO 2007).

https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed_norm/%40relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_089199.pdf accessed 4 June 2026.

⁶ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930'

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-2014-forced-labour-convention-1930> accessed 16 April 2026.



By ratifying the protocol, Saudi Arabia became the fifty-second state worldwide, and notably, the first member state of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to do so. This carries significant legal weight, placing the Kingdom under enforceable international obligations and subjecting it to the ILO's supervisory mechanisms in respect of those obligations.⁷

Concurrent with this international commitment, the Labour Reform Initiative introduced a series of domestic legislative measures directed at restructuring the kafala system.⁸ The kafala system is the Gulf's sponsorship framework which has historically given employers considerable juridical authority over migrant workers, constraining their freedom of movement and ability to terminate or transfer employment relationships without employer consent. Prior to the reforms, foreign workers required employer permission to switch jobs, open bank accounts, or exit the country. The 2021 reforms represent a deliberate, if incremental, effort to recalibrate this power imbalance in a manner more consonant with international human rights and labour standards.⁹ This legislative trajectory was further advanced in 2024 with the adoption of a National Policy for the Elimination of Forced Labour, establishing an institutional and regulatory framework oriented towards the systematic identification and mitigation of forced labour risks across the Kingdom's labour market.¹⁰

However, the extent to which these reforms have produced substantive change remains contested. The Migrant Rights Research Open Repository (MRRORS), an independent research and advocacy organisation dedicated to advancing the rights of migrants within the GCC, has examined the gap between formal legislative change and its practical implementation. Their findings indicate that whilst the formal mechanisms of employer control have undergone modification at the legislative level, the underlying structural power imbalance between employers and migrant workers remains largely intact. Workers continue to exhibit a pronounced degree of practical dependency upon their employers, suggesting that legislative reform has not yet effectuated a meaningful transformation in the lived conditions of migrant labour.¹¹

⁷ International Labour Organization, 'Saudi Arabia Reinforces Its Commitment to Eradicate Forced Labour in All Its Forms' (26 May 2021) <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/saudi-arabia-reinforces-its-commitment-eradicate-forced-labour-all-its> accessed 16 April 2026.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Global People Strategist, 'Saudi Arabia's New Labor Reforms' (18 July 2024) <https://globalpeoplestrategist.com/saudi-arabias-new-labor-reforms/> accessed 16 April 2026.

¹⁰ Saudi Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, 'Progress in the Saudi Labour Market' (25 December 2025) <https://www.hrsd.gov.sa/en/knowledge-centre/articles/progress-saudi-labor-market> accessed 16 April 2026.

¹¹ MRRORS, 'Saudi Labour Reform Initiative: An Overview' (3 November 2024) <https://www.mrrors.org/2024/11/saudis-labour-reform-initiative-an-overview> accessed 16 April 2026.



This conclusion is further compounded by the persistence of recruitment-related debt as a pervasive structural constraint. Notwithstanding formal prohibitions on the imposition of recruitment fees upon workers, migrant workers continue in practice to enter employment relationships encumbered by significant financial obligations to recruitment intermediaries, effectively binding them to their employment regardless of the conditions they encounter and undermining their capacity to exercise the mobility rights nominally conferred by the 2021 reforms. This phenomenon underscores a broader concern within the literature on labour migration governance: that legal reform, absent robust enforcement mechanisms and accessible remedial pathways, risks functioning as a performative exercise rather than a substantive reconfiguration of the conditions that render migrant workers vulnerable to exploitation.¹²

The ILO Complaint: Procedural Framework and Competing Narratives

The complaint submitted to the ILO characterises the situation as one of structural abuse, alleging that migrant workers are systematically subject to exploitation, coercion, and barriers to accessing effective remedial mechanisms. It further claims that workers are unable to freely organise or seek redress, thereby limiting the practical enforcement of their rights.¹³ The complainants argue that these practices amount to a failure by Saudi Arabia to comply with its obligations under ratified ILO conventions. These allegations are supported by documentary evidence of wage theft, confiscation of identity documents, and restrictions on freedom of movement, as well as testimonial evidence gathered by trade union organisations from workers across multiple sectors and nationalities. On the basis of this evidence, the complainants assert that such practices constitute a failure by Saudi Arabia to discharge its treaty obligations under the ratified ILO conventions, not merely as isolated incidents, but as manifestations of systemic institutional failure.¹⁴

The Saudi Government maintains that the Kingdom has undertaken substantial and ongoing reforms in close institutional cooperation with the ILO, pointing to the ratification of the 2014 Protocol, the 2021 Labour Reform Initiative, and the 2024 National Policy as evidence of a genuine

¹² Ibid.

¹³ International Labour Organization Governing Body, *Reports of the Officers of the Governing Body: First Report – Complaint Submitted under Article 26 of the ILO Constitution Alleging Non-Observance by Saudi Arabia of Conventions Nos 29, 95, 111, 143 and 155*, 355th Session (Geneva, 17–27 November 2025) (26 November 2025) <https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-11/GB355-INS-17-1-%5BNORMES-251001-002%5D-EN.pdf> accessed 16 April 2026.

¹⁴ Ibid.



and progressive commitment to compliance. The Government contests both the factual characterisation advanced by the complainants and the legal receivability of the complaint. In March 2026, however, the ILO Governing Body determined the complaint to be receivable in relation to Conventions Nos. 29, 95, and 111, whilst deferring substantive consideration to its 358th Session in November 2026 and encouraging continued bilateral dialogue between the parties.¹⁵

Legal Analysis: Forced Labour under Convention No. 29 and the 2014 protocol

The central legal question is whether the alleged treatment of migrant workers could, if substantiated, amount to forced labour within the meaning of the Forced Labour Convention No. 29. Article 2(1) of the convention defines forced labour as work exacted under the menace of a penalty and without voluntary consent. ILO supervisory bodies interpret the “menace of penalty” broadly, encompassing practices such as passport confiscation, wage withholding, and restrictions on movement. The allegations contained in the complaint, including the retention of identity documents, wage theft, and barriers to terminating employment may fall within this interpretation if proven.¹⁶

The voluntariness requirement warrants equally careful analysis. The ILO supervisory framework recognizes that consent may be rendered legally ineffective in circumstances where workers are unable, as a practical matter, to leave their employment due to the combined operation of administrative restrictions, employer control mechanisms, and pre-existing financial obligations arising from recruitment-related debt. The 2014 Protocol reinforces this analysis by imposing specific obligations upon States parties in relation to the protection of victims of forced labour, including obligations to ensure access to appropriate and effective remedies and to prevent abusive recruitment practices. Whilst the Labour Reform Initiative 2021 purports to expand worker mobility at the legislative level, the empirical evidence reviewed above raises legitimate questions as to whether the conditions necessary for the genuine exercise of voluntary consent are, in practice, satisfied and whether Saudi Arabia has fulfilled its Protocol obligations.¹⁷ At this stage,

¹⁵ Amnesty International, ‘Global: ILO member states must not give in to Saudi demands for dismissal of migrant labour complaint’ (24 March 2026) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/03/global-ilo-member-states-must-not-give-in-to-saudi-demands-for-dismissal-of-migrant-labour-complaint/> accessed 16 April 2026.

¹⁶ Devi Das, ‘Slavery and Forced Labour’ (2022) 2(1) *Indian Journal of Integrated Research in Law* 1–15.

¹⁷ MRRORS, ‘Saudi Labour Reform Initiative: An Overview’ (3 November 2024) <https://www.mrrors.org/2024/11/saudis-labour-reform-initiative-an-overview> accessed 16 April 2026.



it would be premature to conclude that Saudi Arabia is in breach of Convention No. 29. However, the complaint highlights a legally significant distinction between formal legislative reform and effective implementation in practice.

Implications for the 2034 FIFA World Cup

The pending ILO proceedings carry substantial implications that extend beyond the immediate bilateral dispute, raising foundational questions regarding the governance of migrant labour in the context of large-scale international sporting events. Evidence of ongoing abuses, including those documented by Human Rights Watch, indicates that migrant workers continue to face significant risks in sectors commonly associated with mega sporting events.¹⁸ The scale of infrastructure development required for the 2034 FIFA World Cup is likely to increase reliance on migrant labour, thereby intensifying scrutiny of Saudi Arabia's compliance with international labour standards. This concern is reinforced by the CEACR's consistent interpretation of Article 2 as extending to situations where migrant workers face passport retention, debt bondage, or restrictions on freedom of movement, precisely the conditions alleged in the present complaint.¹⁹ This concern is further reinforced by the bilateral labour recruitment agreements concluded between Saudi Arabia and the Government of Somalia on the same day that Saudi Arabia was announced as host of the tournament.²⁰ The ILO had previously identified such agreements as falling short of international labour standards on migrant worker recruitment, raising further questions about the Kingdom's commitment to effective implementation beyond formal legislative reform.²¹ These concerns collectively underscore why the forthcoming ILO proceedings will be decisive in determining whether adequate safeguards exist ahead of 2034.²²

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, 'FIFA/Qatar: Commit to Compensate Abused Migrant Workers Existing Compensation Mechanisms Critical Starting Point to Fix Longstanding Wrongs' (12 August 2022) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/12/fifa/qatar-commit-to-compensate-abusedmigrant-workers> accessed 16 April 2026.

¹⁹ ILO, *Protecting Migrant Workers from Forced Labour* (ILO Brief: Promising Practices in Addressing Forced Labour, May 2025) <https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/FL%20Brief%20-%20Protecting%20Migrant%20Workers.pdf> accessed 4 June 2026.

²⁰ Saudi Press Agency, 'Saudi Arabia and Somalia Sign Labour Agreements' (11 December 2024) <https://www.spa.gov.sa/en/N2223340> accessed 16 April 2026.

²¹ International Labour Organization, *Decision concerning Complaint Alleging Non-Observance by Saudi Arabia of the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No 29)* (Conference Paper, 2025) <https://www.ilo.org/resource/conference-paper/gb/355/decision-concerning-complaint-alleging-non-observance-saudi-arabia> accessed 16 April 2026.

²² UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 'UN Experts Urge Saudi Arabia to End Kafala System Amidst World Cup Preparations' (29 April 2026) <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/04/un-experts-urge-saudi-arabia-end-kafala-system-amidst-world-cup-preparations> accessed 4 June 2026.



Conclusion

On 30 March 2026, the ILO Governing Body confirmed the receivability of the complaint and deferred further consideration to November 2026, a decision that keeps the international spotlight firmly on Saudi Arabia's labour governance framework.²³ At present, no definitive legal conclusion can be drawn as to whether Saudi Arabia is in breach of its obligations under the ratified ILO conventions. The Kingdom's formal legislative record, including the ratification of the 2014 Protocol, the 2021 Labour Reform Initiative, and the 2024 National Policy reflects a degree of engagement with international labour standards that cannot be dismissed. Nevertheless, the evidence reviewed in this blog supports the conclusion that formal legislative reform has not yet translated into substantive and effective protection for migrant workers in practice.

The ongoing proceedings highlight a central challenge in international labour law: the distinction between legislative reform and its effective implementation. Saudi Arabia's reforms have altered the legal framework, but the adequacy and enforcement of these reforms remain subject to legitimate international scrutiny. The forthcoming ILO proceedings in November 2026 will therefore be significant in assessing whether these reforms have produced meaningful protection for migrant workers ahead of the 2034 FIFA World Cup, and whether sufficient safeguards exist to prevent a recurrence of the abuses documented in connection with the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar.

²³ International Labour Organization Governing Body, *Complaint Submitted under Article 26 of the ILO Constitution Alleging Non-Observance by Saudi Arabia of Conventions Nos 29, 95, 111, 143 and 155*, 356th Session (Geneva, 23 March–2 April 2026) (30 March 2026) <https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2026-03/GB356-INS-15-%5BNORMES-260216-001%5D-EN.pdf> accessed 16 April 2026.



Bibliography

Primary Sources

Legislation and International Instruments

International Labour Organization, Forced Labour Convention 1930 (No 29) (entered into force 1 May 1932).

International Labour Organization, Protection of Wages Convention 1949 (No 95) (entered into force 24 September 1952).

International Labour Organization, Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention 1958 (No 111) (entered into force 15 June 1960).

International Labour Organization, Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention 1930 (No 29) (entered into force 9 November 2016).

Institutional Documents

International Labour Organization, ‘Saudi Arabia Reinforces Its Commitment to Eradicate Forced Labour in All Its Forms’ (26 May 2021) <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/saudi-arabia-reinforces-its-commitment-eradicate-forced-labour-all-its> accessed 16 April 2026.

International Labour Organization, *Decision concerning Complaint Alleging Non-Observance by Saudi Arabia of the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No 29)* (Conference Paper, 2025) <https://www.ilo.org/resource/conference-paper/gb/355/decision-concerning-complaint-alleging-non-observance-saudi-arabia> accessed 16 April 2026.

International Labour Organization Governing Body, *Reports of the Officers of the Governing Body: First report – Complaint submitted under article 26 of the ILO Constitution alleging non-*



observance by Saudi Arabia of Conventions Nos 29, 95, 111, 143 and 155, 355th Session (Geneva, 17–27 November 2025) (26 November 2025)

<https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-11/GB355-INS-17-1-%5BNORMES-251001-002%5D-EN.pdf> accessed 16 April 2026.

International Labour Organization Governing Body, *Complaint Submitted under Article 26 of the ILO Constitution Alleging Non-Observance by Saudi Arabia of Conventions Nos 29, 95, 111, 143 and 155*, 356th Session (Geneva, 23 March–2 April 2026) (30 March 2026)

<https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2026-03/GB356-INS-15-%5BNORMES-260216-001%5D-EN.pdf> accessed 16 April 2026.

ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations, *Eradication of Forced Labour: General Survey Concerning the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No 29) and the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No 105)*, Report III (Part 1B), ILC 96th Session (ILO 2007).

https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed_norm/%40relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_089199.pdf accessed 4 June 2026.

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930’ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-2014-forced-labour-convention-1930> accessed 16 April 2026.

Saudi Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, ‘Progress in the Saudi Labour Market’ (25 December 2025) <https://www.hrsd.gov.sa/en/knowledge-centre/articles/progress-saudi-labor-market> accessed 16 April 2026.

Saudi Press Agency, ‘Saudi Arabia and Somalia Sign Labour Agreements’ (11 December 2024) <https://www.spa.gov.sa/en/N2223340> accessed 16 April 2026.

UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, ‘UN Experts Urge Saudi Arabia to End Kafala System Amidst World Cup Preparations’ (29 April 2026) <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press->



[releases/2026/04/un-experts-urge-saudi-arabia-end-kafala-system-amidst-world-cup-preparations](#)

accessed 4 June 2026.

Secondary Sources

Journal Articles

Das D, 'Slavery and Forced Labour' (2022) 2(1) Indian Journal of Integrated Research in Law 1–15.

Reports and Advocacy Sources

Amnesty International, 'Global: ILO member states must not give in to Saudi demands for dismissal of migrant labour complaint' (24 March 2026)

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/03/global-ilo-member-states-must-not-give-in-to-saudi-demands-for-dismissal-of-migrant-labour-complaint/> accessed 16 April 2026.

Human Rights Watch, 'Saudi Arabia: ILO Forced Labour Complaint a Wake-Up Call' (5 June 2024) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/06/05/saudi-arabia-ilo-forced-labor-complaint-wake-call> accessed 16 April 2026.

Human Rights Watch, 'FIFA/Qatar: Commit to Compensate Abused Migrant Workers Existing Compensation Mechanisms Critical Starting Point to Fix Longstanding Wrongs' (12 August 2022) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/12/fifa/qatar-commit-to-compensate-abused-migrant-workers> accessed 16 April 2026.

MRRORS, 'Saudi Labour Reform Initiative: An Overview' (3 November 2024)

<https://www.mrrors.org/2024/11/saudis-labour-reform-initiative-an-overview> accessed 16 April 2026.

Global People Strategist, 'Saudi Arabia's New Labor Reforms' (18 July 2024)

<https://globalpeoplestrategist.com/saudi-arabias-new-labor-reforms/> accessed 16 April 2026.



International Labour Organization, ‘“Sponsorship Reform and Internal Labour Market Mobility for Migrant Workers in the Arab States’ (23 July 2023)

<https://www.ilo.org/resource/other/sponsorship-reform-and-internal-labour-market-mobility-migrant-workers-arab> accessed 4 June 2026.

Mikaela DesLauriers, "'Sportswashing' Human Rights Abuses: FIFA and Forced Labour' (Bloomsbury Intelligence and Security Institute, 19 July 2024)