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Labor Pains: The Birth of Human Rights in Dubai

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Abstract

The massive growth Dubai has seen in overall population and in the construction and tourism industries specifically over the past four decades has been accompanied by a massive influx in migrant workers from around the region. While Dubai has received a great amount of attention for its construction of massive skyscrapers and man-made islands, the country's reputation has been tarnished by reports of unfair labor practices and poor treatment of migrant workers. Human rights advocate groups have shone a spotlight on the government of Dubai, forcing the country to take measures to improve protections for workers, but the effectiveness of these measures continues to be questioned and debated.

The status of migrant workers has become even more precarious in recent years due to the downturn of the economy, with reports of many laborers being deported or abandoned in labor camps. In order to assuage concerns about labor conditions, the government of Dubai needs to a) work closely with human rights groups to bring its labor regulations in line with what is considered acceptable, b) develop a better system for enforcement of the regulations, and c) provide aid to workers who no longer have employment in the country.

This Paper will examine the current status of migrant labor in Dubai. It will begin with an introduction to the growth of Dubai and the construction and tourism industries that has led to the increased need for labor over the past forty years. It will then discuss the means by which migrant workers are brought into the country and look at the demographics of the migrant workers that have entered Dubai in recent years. Next, it will review the constitutional and legal protections afforded to laborers and the remedies available to laborers in instances of unfair labor practices and analyze the effectiveness of these protections and remedies. It will then address the attention that has been focused on the labor practices in Dubai by human rights advocates, the government's response to these reports, and the current status of the debate. It will then examine the labor disputes in Dubai from a comparative law framework in the hopes of determining to what extent justice is served for migrant workers who face unfair practices in Dubai versus elsewhere in the region and across the world. Finally, it will conclude by making recommendations for what the country can do to address the labor issues it still faces.