

# Reforms meant to create Emirati jobs

Labour minister explains changes planned for sponsorship system

- By Samir Salama, Associate Editor
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Abu Dhabi: Reforms planned for the controversial sponsorship system for foreign workers are designed to create more jobs for Emiratis, a top official told the Federal national Council (FNC) on Tuesday.

"The long-term goal of reforming the sponsorship system is creating a flexible labour market that meets development requirements. Our labour market must be flexible, efficient and committed to Emiratisation policies as top priority," said Saqr Gobash Saeed Gobash, Minister of Labour.

Gobash said Tanmia, the agency in charge of employment of Emiratis, was assigned to draw up an urgent plan for Emiratisation in the eastern region.

This plan will be presented to the Cabinet within three to four weeks.

"The Emiratisation plan will later be covering the entire country," Gobash said. Yousuf Al Nuaimi, an FNC member from Ras al Khaimah, posed a question on labour reforms to Gobash.

"The country took the example of the GCC countries in the local sponsor system, but the region is now witnessing a debate on measures that should be taken to renounce this system," said Al Nuaimi.

He asked what the government's intentions were in abolishing sponsorship and "treating its negative effects".

## Opportunities

Al Nuaimi argued that abolishing the system would provide more job opportunities for Emiratis and limit the "domination" of foreigners in the nation's work force.

"Out of 230,000 Emiratis aged 15 to 24 years, only 15,000 are employed in the private sector," he said, asking whether this is fair to the citizens of this country.

Al Nuaimi said foreign workers cost the Dh55 billion a year in social assistance and costs, which includes government subsidies for electricity and their use of public services and infrastructure and security.

He said it could limit the number of Emiratis in the private sector if more foreign labour is brought in.

Emiratis make up just 1.5 per cent of the private sector — 69,000 out of an estimated 2.6 million private sector workers, according to 2009 figures.

Unskilled labour makes up 80 per cent of the UAE's expatriate workers.

Al Nuaimi said the government would need additional measures to limit the negative impact of a decision to abolish the sponsor system.

Ruling out scrapping the sponsor system, the labour minister said he had affirmed publicly that the sponsorship system in principle was an acceptable system.

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