

COMMENTARY

No.335

Tuesday, 1 December 2015

Bahraini players' Support for Salman Raise More Questions than Answers

James M. Dorsey

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Bahraini soccer players have sought in recent statements to absolve Asian Football Confederation (AFC) president and world soccer body FIFA presidential candidate Sheikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa, a member of the Gulf island's ruling family, of any moral or direct responsibility for the arrest, dismissal and abuse of hundreds of sports executives and athletes accused of having protested against repressive and discriminatory rule.

The statements, including one by Ala'a Hubail, Bahrain's top player, who was publicly humiliated on national television in what amounted to a kangaroo court with the acquiescence of the Gulf state's top sports executive and has alleged that he was tortured while under arrest in 2011, came as human rights activists unsuccessfully demanded that FIFA disqualify Sheikh Salman, who at the time of the arrests was head of the Bahrain Football Association (BFA).

The statements, made in a series of interviews with Inside World Football raise more questions than that they provide answers to the long-standing allegations against Sheikh Salman. He has consistently denied personal involvement but repeatedly stopped short of refuting underlying facts. His statements appeared to be carefully crafted to ensure that FIFA's ethics committee would have no grounds to disqualify his candidacy, which was approved earlier this week.

The usually tight-lipped Bahraini national, in his most detailed response, recently acknowledged government plans in 2011 to establish a committee that would identify sports executives and athletes opposed to the government and single them out for punishment. Asserting that the committee was never constituted, Sheikh Salman stopped short of denying reports by the Bahrain

News Agency (BNA), the government's official mouthpiece, that he would have been head of committee.

Sheikh Salman also never denied BNA reports quoting heads of sports associations, including his own BFA secretary general at the time, Abdul Rahman Al Sayar, that they were taking actions against executives and athletes who in the words of Al Sayar had violated the law "through participation in marches or gatherings illegal, or anything else (that) was intended to 'attempt to overthrow the regime or offending national codes.'"

Hubail as well as his brother Mohammed, who also played for Bahrain's national team, were only released from prison after FIFA pressured the government on their behalf. Four other national team players were detained at the same time.

In his endorsement of Sheikh Salman's FIFA candidacy, Hubail did not retract his earlier assertions that he had been arrested and tortured in 2011. Speaking to Inside World Football, Hubail charged that the media had portrayed him as a traitor. It was not clear whether this was a reference to a talk show broadcast on state-run television in April 2011 in which Hubail participated and was accused by the show's host of treason for participating in an anti-government protest during a popular revolt.

Sheikh Salman's then superior, Prince Nasser bin Hamad al-Khalifa, son of King Hamad bin Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa, commander of Bahrain's Royal Guard, head of its National Olympic Committee, and the official who decreed establishment of the committee the AFC president was supposed to head, phoned in to the show at the time to congratulate the hosts and reinforce their message.

"Well done, guys. And on your efforts, all of you. And to everyone who stood and proved his loyalty to the Kingdom of Bahrain, leadership and people. And anyone who called for the fall of the regime, may a wall fall on his head... People have involved themselves in matters and have lost the love of their fans. People have entered labyrinths in which they will be lost... Anyone who involved himself in these matters and was part of it will be held accountable. Whether he is an athlete, socialite or politician, whatever he is — he will now be held accountable. Today is judgment day. May God grant patience and strength to all. Bahrain is an island and there is nowhere to escape... It is known who stood against us. The days will judge," Prince Nasser said.

Neither Hubail, who has largely remained silent since speaking out about his ordeal 4.5 years ago, nor Inside World Football explained what had persuaded the player to break his silence and endorse Sheikh Salman.

Hubail told the sports publication that he hoped "Sheikh Salman becomes (FIFA) president because he would be the first Arab president and that makes me very proud." He denied the allegations against Sheikh Salman.

"I know Salman and have travelled several times with him. I have known him a long time. It is not in his character to do anything like this. It is unfair to say that... Sheikh Salman was not involved in the political decisions. They (media and human rights organizations) are using 2011 because he is part of the (Bahraini) Royal family. I want to be completely honest. I have not encountered anything to believe these allegations are true," Al Oraibi was playing a match in Qatar when he was sentenced. He never returned to Bahrain. Hubail said.

His remarks were echoed by two other players, Sayed Adnan and the squad's goalkeeper, Ali Saeed, who were also detained in 2011 and who like Hubail have remained silent in recent years. Like in the case of Hubail, it was not clear why Saeed and Adnan, who briefly fled to Australia, had decided to break their silence.

Adnan told Inside World Football that he was "absolutely" sure that the allegations against Sheikh Salman were false and that torture had not occurred. Adnan's remarks contradicted an independent government-endorsed inquiry in 2011 that concluded that torture of some of those arrested in the wake of the 2011 revolt had occurred. The report's conclusions made no specific reference to athletes or sports executives. "I have been in Australia but did not hear one person that said he (Salman) did all these things," Adnan said.

Adnan's remarks also contrasted starkly with statements he made in Australia four years ago when he asserted that "my colleagues were tortured to say that I organized the march just like what happened with Ali Saeed. A high-level officer sent me a message by way of the released detainees to return to Bahrain. He said that I could return and they would not touch me," he said. Distrustful of Bahraini authorities, Adnan added: "If they have nothing to do with me, then why were my colleagues tortured and why were the authorities asking them about me?"

Saeed, ignoring the fact that controversy over Sheikh Salman's human rights record has repeatedly surfaced since 2011, asked, "Why is it coming now?"

"He (Sheikh Salman) will be number one in the world if he comes to FIFA so nobody will be over him – they will not let him take it easy. They will look to find others (for the presidency) but tell me, who is really the good man? I am happy that Prince Ali of Lebanon is a candidate. But I wish the best for Sheikh Salman because he is from my country. I will be proud if he cuts it. It is an honour for us if he is the one (president) of FIFA," Saeed said, getting his facts wrong. Prince Ali is a brother of King Abdullah of Jordan.

Former Bahrain national team and Al Shabab SC player Hakeem al Oraibi and his family repeatedly asked the BFA during Sheikh Salman's reign to intervene in the two instances in which the player was arrested. Al Oraibi, speaking from Australia where he plays for Green Gully SC, said the BFA promised to help but never did.

Al Oraibi was held in 2010 for six months during which he says he was repeatedly beaten on his legs because he was a player before being released without being charged. Two years later he was again detained for three months and regularly beaten after which he was released on bail but charged with setting a police station on fire. Al Oraibi was ultimately sentenced to ten years in prison despite his ability to prove that he could be seen at the moment of the attack on television playing a televised soccer match.

"My family talked to the BFA. They gave them documentation. The documentation was given to Salman but he didn't do anything," Al Oraibi said. He said the BFA told his family they "would see what they could do.... They mentioned Sheikh Salman by name. They never came back to them... The BFA knew I was playing live on television. The BFA should have advised the police of this. Especially since I have been playing for the national team since I was a kid.... They should have cared," Al Oraibi said.

The police officers who beat Al Oraibi probably cared little about Bahraini soccer. Al Oraibi said they were Pakistani, Yemeni and Jordanian nationals.

That, however, should have been a concern for Sheikh Salman even if had no direct leverage over Bahrain's security forces and judiciary. Al Oraibi was playing a match in Qatar when he was sentenced. He never returned to Bahrain.

The FIFA presidential candidate never spoke out about what was an apparent miscarriage of justice in the case of Al Oraibi as he never did about the ordeal of Hubail and other players. All of which begs the question why players are suddenly rallying around a man who at the very least never truly stood up for them.

Note: This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web link: <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2015/11/bahraini-players-support-for-salman.html>

James M. Dorsey is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, co-director of the Institute of Fan Culture of the University of Würzburg, and the author of the blog, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer. Email: jmdorsey@questfze.com

As part of its editorial policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spelling and date formats to make the text uniformly accessible and stylistically consistent. The views

expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of the MEI@ND. Editor, **MEI@ND: P R Kumaraswamy**