

COMMENTARY

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Saudi Arabia Mulls Granting Women

Access to Stadia

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Saudi Arabia's secretive ruling family is mulling allowing women to attend soccer matches. No Saudi official has suggested that the controversial issue is under discussion but if past experience is any indication, a series of statements and denials suggests that a debate is underway.

The debate would be a revival of closed door discussions that has been waged on and off for the past two years. Attempting to assess debates within the secretive family is not dissimilar to Kremlinology, the speculative science analysts developed in an effort to understand the inner workings of the Soviet leadership.

Granting women sporting rights in the kingdom that in most parts of the world would be taken for granted takes on added significance with the Saudi Football Federation's recent suggestion that the kingdom will compete against the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Thailand and Iran for the right to host the 2019 Asia Cup; hints that Saudi Arabia may field a serious candidate for next year's election of a new head of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) and the acquisition by Saudi Prince Abdullah bin Mosaad of a 50 per cent stake in third tier English club Sheffield United.

The moves that would project Saudi Arabia on the global soccer map are not without risk as Qatar and Abu Dhabi have learnt the hard way. Qatar had expected to be cheered when it won the hosting rights for the 2022 World Cup, but has since had to deal with a barrage of criticism, negative publicity and demands that the tournament's venue be moved. Recent improvements in the material conditions of foreign labour, who constitute a majority of the Gulf state's population, are the result of a threat by international trade unions and human rights groups

to boycott the World Cup and companies involved in the construction of infrastructure related to the tournament if Qatar fails to adhere to international labour standards.

Human Rights Watch last month accused the UAE of using its ownership of English Premier League club Manchester City and move into the United States' Major League Soccer to polish an image increasingly tarnished by autocratic and counterrevolutionary policies, including the recent sentencing of scores of dissidents on charges of plotting to overthrow the government and UAE support for the military coup that ousted Egyptian president Mohammad Morsi.

A country that is developing its first national sports plan for men only; lacks physical education for girls in public schools; forces women's soccer clubs to operate in a legal and social nether land; bans women from driving, travelling without authorization from a male relative and working in a host of professions; and when it was forced last year by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to field women athletes chose two minor expatriates, Saudi Arabia is particularly vulnerable to criticism.

In minor concessions, Saudi Arabia's religious police said earlier this year that women would be allowed to ride bikes and motorbikes in recreational areas provided that they were properly dressed and accompanied by a male relative. Authorities also announced that they would allow girl's physical education in private schools as long as it was in line with Islamic law.

Saudi Football Federation (SFF) president Ahmed Eid Alharbi, a storied former goalkeeper who became the kingdom's first elected sports official after his predecessor, a member of the ruling family, was forced under fan pressure to step down, has hinted at the economic impact of allowing women to attend soccer matches would have.

He said earlier this year that the creation of facilities for women would increase capacity at stadiums by 15 per cent. Alharbi said the Prince Abdullah Al-Faisal Stadium in Jeddah would be the first to accommodate up to 32,000 women followed by the King Abdullah City stadium in the capital in 2014. Saudi Arabia, which enforces strict gender segregation, first announced in 2012 plans to upgrade the Jeddah stadium to enable women to enter.

Alharbi later qualified his remarks by saying that the decision to lift the ban on women was not his. "A decision like this is a sovereign decision. Neither I nor SAFF can make it. Only the political leadership in this country can make that decision," he said.

Prospects for women's attendance were further thrown into doubt in the past week when Prince Nawaf bin Faisal, the head of the youth welfare authority who resigned as head of the national soccer body, and the SFF denied that women would be granted access to the King Fahd Stadium in Riyadh during last week's friendly against New Zealand. The denial was issued after the stadium's manager, Sulaiman al-Yousef, manager of King Fahd Stadium, announced that foreign women and children would be permitted to watch the match. A picture on the website of the Saudi-owned *Al-Arabiya* television network of a few women and children in the stadium appeared to counter the denial.

It would not be the first time that Saudi Arabia succumbed to pressure. Protests by Sweden in 2006 in advance of a friendly in Riyadh persuaded the kingdom to allow Swedish women to attend separated from men by seating them in areas reserved for the media

The debate about women's access to soccer matches is being waged against the backdrop of a series of anti-government incidents in the wake of last year's resignation of Prince Nawaf. A Facebook page entitled Nasrawi Revolution demanded the resignation of Prince Faisal bin Turki, the owner of storied Riyadh club Al Nasser FC and a burly nephew of King Abdullah who sports a moustache and chin hair. A YouTube video captured Prince Faisal seemingly being pelted and chanted against as he rushed off the soccer pitch after rudely shoving a security official aside.

"Everything is upside down. Revolution is possible. There is change, but it is slow. It has to be fast. Nobody knows what will happen," said a Saudi sports journalist referring to broader discontent in the kingdom that goes far beyond soccer.

Note: This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced with the author's permission. Web link: <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2013/09/saudi-arabia-mulls-granting-women.html>

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