

COMMENTARY

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Gaza casts shadow over Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup

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World soccer body FIFA has dispatched investigators to Egypt to probe allegations of government interference as the country prepares for potentially risky bids to host two international tournaments, the 2017 Beach Soccer World Cup and the 2018 FIFA Under-17 Women's World Cup.

The FIFA investigation and the bids come against the background of a military coup that last year toppled Egypt's first and only democratically elected president and a presidential election this month likely to effectively cement the military's grip on the country, which is marred by a brutal crackdown on regime opponents and political freedoms in which more than 3,000 people have been killed, some 17,000 wounded and 19,000 detained.

The investigation focuses on the government's forcing of elections in March of presidents of Egypt's two foremost clubs, storied Cairo arch rivals Al Ahli SC and Al Zamalek SC, whose militant supporters played a key role in the toppling three years ago of President Hosni Mubarak and subsequent anti-military protests.

The elections were designed to ensure that the clubs were led by regime loyalists and to block the prospects of candidates close to Gamal Mubarak, the imprisoned, neo-liberal son of the ousted president, whom the military sees as a threat to its sprawling economic and commercial interests.

Al Ahli and Zamalek had resisted holding elections prior to the expected promulgation of a new sports law. FIFA decided to investigate after the Egyptian Football Association failed to satisfactorily reply to a demand by the soccer body for an explanation of the government's interference.

Egypt's bids for the two soccer tournaments constitute an effort to repair the country's image badly tarnished by its abysmal human rights record. The bids could well backfire like in the case of 2022 World Cup host Qatar that is under pressure to reform restrictive labour conditions and put Egypt's repressive regime even more under the spotlight.

Egyptian government interference goes however beyond club elections. Fans have been banned from attending matches for more than two years, initially to prevent further violence in the wake of a politically loaded brawl in Port Said in February 2012 in which 74 Al Ahli fans were killed. Few doubt that the security forces and the military which was in government at the time allowed the incident to happen in an effort to cut highly-politicized, street battle-hardened soccer fans down to size.

The ban has since last year's coup against Mohammad Morsi, who is standing trial on multiple charges, including treason, and whose Muslim Brotherhood has been banned as a terrorist organization, increasingly been maintained to prevent the soccer pitch from re-emerging as an opposition rallying point.

The interior ministry hopes to reduce the threat by next season allowing fans to return to stadia that are policed by private security firms rather than the security forces, widely viewed as the hated, repressive arm of an autocratic regime and a lightning rod for soccer activism.

FIFA has remained silent on the ban that has everything to do with survival of the Egyptian regime and curtailing expressions of dissent. FIFA has similarly allowed its board and that of regional associations, certainly those in the Middle East and North Africa, to be populated by autocratic pawns and members of ruling families more interested in maintaining the status quo than the interests of the sport and the ideals they at best pay lip service to.

The struggle for who represents Asia in the FIFA executive committee is a case in point. Asian Football Confederation (AFC) president Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa, who also heads the Bahrain Football Association, was last year elected to clean up the scandal-ridden group after its former president, Mohammed Bin Hammam, was banned for life from involvement in soccer on grounds of alleged corruption.

Instead, Sheikh Salman, a member of Bahrain's ruling family, has spent his first year in office seeking to expand his power base at the expense of soccer governance's few reformers, among whom first and foremost Jordan's Prince Ali Bin Al Hussein, whom Sheikh Salman in an undemocratic manoeuvre rather than a free and fair election, is seeking to replace as FIFA vice president. Prince Ali is one of the few international soccer executives who has used his position for the greater good of the game.

Sheikh Salman's ascendancy is telling in and of itself. Few international organizations would have elected as president a man who has refused to say a word about the public denunciation, detention and torture on his watch of national team players because of their participation in mass anti-government protests and the politically motivated incarceration of two soccer teams. Sheikh Salman's silence is particularly telling at a time that controversy over labour conditions in Qatar and anti-FIFA protests in Brazil have put human and social rights on world soccer's agenda.

Hakan Sukur, an all-time Turkish soccer star-turned-controversial Islamist politician, recently highlighted the pervasiveness, even in the Middle East and North Africa's few pluralistic, democratic societies, of the inextricable intertwining of politics in soccer and the laxity of policing by FIFA and its regional associations of their insistence in upholding the fiction that sports and politics are separate.

In a recent interview, Sukur, a supporter of Erdogan's Islamist rival, Fethullah Gulen, a self-exiled cleric and leader of one of the world's largest Islamist movements, disclosed that he had consulted Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on his plans to run for the presidency of Turkish Football Federation (TFF).

"It was normal to receive instructions behind the curtain from Erdogan about every decision. Unfortunately, at the time we did not perceive it as a result of authoritarianism, but simply Erdogan's interest in sports," he told pro-Gulen *Zaman* newspaper.

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/2014/08/gaza-casts-shadow-over-qatars-hosting.html>

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