

COMMENTARY

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Saudi Efforts to Professionalize Soccer Marred by Politics

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Efforts to professionalize soccer in Saudi Arabia in advance of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar are marred by efforts to maintain political control of the game, a lack of transparency and accountability, and disputes between Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Prominent Saudi businessmen and soccer officials grumbled over the awarding by the Saudi Arabian Football Federation (SAFF) of soccer broadcast rights to Middle East Broadcasting Center Group (MBC) for a period of 10 years in a deal worth 3.6 billion Saudi riyals or \$960 million. The deal with MBC, which is chaired by Sheikh Waleed Bin Ibrahim Al Brahim, an in-law of Saudi Arabia's ruling Al Saud family, was rushed through in an effort to pre-empt a possible bid by beIN Sports, the sports channel of the Qatari state-owned Al Jazeera network. MBC's flagship, Al Arabiya, was founded as a counterweight to Al Jazeera.

Saudi Arabia alongside the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain withdrew its ambassador from Doha earlier this year in protest against Qatari support of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist group whose government was last year overthrown by a military coup in Egypt and which has since been banned as a terrorist organization in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Egypt this week banned the group's political arm, the Freedom and Justice Party.

Ahmed Eid Al Harbi, the federation's first freely elected president who is widely seen as a reformer, suggested in a news conference that the non-transparent awarding had been decided in consultation with the senior government officials because there had been national issues involved that were "larger than soccer." Al Harbi did not elaborate on what those issues were.

But Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, a prominent member of the Saudi ruling family and one of the world's wealthiest men, suggested on Twitter that the awarding to MBC had violated King Abdullah's orders without specifying what they were. Prince Alwaleed said that he had put

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forward a bid that was 400 million riyals (\$100 million) higher than that of MBC. MBC expects to annually broadcast some 240 matches on four free-to-air channels launched earlier this month.

The awarding came shortly after King Abdullah tasked the Saudi national oil company Aramco with the construction in the next two years of 11 stadia, each with a capacity of 45,000 spectators. The decision coupled with a plan to privatize soccer clubs that are owned by the government or members of the ruling family appeared to have resolved a debate about whether the kingdom's first national sports plan should emphasize spectator or performance sports.

The debate was sparked by concerns that soccer pitches like in other Middle Eastern and North African countries could emerge as venues for the expression of pent-up anger and frustration. In the realization that Saudis are soccer crazy, the government has quietly sought advice on how to deal with fans following a number of incidents on Saudi pitches and fans forcing Al Harbi's predecessor Prince Nawaf bin Faisal to step down, the first time popular pressure obliged a member of a Gulf ruling family to resign.

The plan to build 11 new stadia made no mention of possibly including facilities for women spectators in a country that enforces strict gender segregation. The issue of soccer pitches as a venue for the venting of pent-up anger and frustration arose again during the recent World Cup in Brazil against a backdrop of an on-off again debate in the kingdom about women's sports and access to stadia. A Saudi psychiatrist, Imad al-Dowsari, warned in a study that women's passion for soccer served to release pent-up energy and endangered their role in society.

Saudi Arabia has no official facilities for female athletes or physical education programs for girls in public schools. Spanish consultants hired to draft Saudi Arabia's first ever national sports plan were instructed by the government to do so for men only.

Saudi Arabia alongside Yemen was moreover the only Middle Eastern nation that refused to sign on to a campaign by the region's soccer associations grouped in the West Asian Football Federation (WAFF) to put women's soccer on par with men's football.

Human Rights Watch has accused Saudi Arabia of kowtowing to assertions by the country's powerful conservative Muslim clerics that female sports constitute "steps of the devil" as well as a corrupting and satanic influence that would spread decadence. The clerics warned that running and jumping could damage a woman's hymen and ruin her chances of getting married.

Concern that the World Cup could lead to violations of Saudi Arabia's strict gender rules prompted authorities in the province of Mecca, home to Islam's holiest city, to remove public television screens during the tournament to prevent men and women from mixing.

The move sparked protests on social media. "Those who removed the screens showing the World Cup in the gardens didn't do it because of mixing but because they love to kill peoples' pleasure," thundered an angry soccer fan on Twitter. "If a person is sitting with his family, and he is in charge, what kind of mixing are they talking about?" asked another.

For his part Al Harbi last year suggested that the creation of facilities for women would increase capacity at stadiums by 15 percent. He initially announced that two stadia in Jeddah and Riyadh would be refurbished so that they could accommodate women but then was forced to backtrack saying that it would have to be based on “a sovereign decision. Neither I nor SAFF can make it. Only the political leadership in this country can make that decision.”

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:

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