



COMMENTARY

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Sports Associations Step up Pressure on Human Rights Violators

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International sporting associations have hardened their stance towards wannabe hosts of mega-events, who violate basic rights, including those of women and migrant workers.

The hardening stance stands out against the recent backdrop of democratic leaders trekking to Saudi Arabia to pay their respects to newly enthroned King Salman with no mention of the kingdom's escalating violations of basic rights and cruel punishments.

The International Volleyball Federation (FIVB), in the most strident example of sports associations' greater emphasis on rights, rejected an Iranian bid to host an Under-19 men's volleyball world championship because of Iranian restrictions on women entering the stadium.

In response, Iran has said that it would allow foreign women to attend men's games in stadia. Yet, even that concession appeared to relate only to certain categories of women.

State-owned IRNA news agency quoted Iranian Volleyball Federation president Mahmoud Afshardoust as saying that only "foreign women as employees of embassies, the families of foreign teams or other foreign women living in Tehran are permitted to attend the men's volleyball competitions." A British-Iranian law graduate, Ghoncheh Ghavami, was recently released from prison in Tehran pending trial for attempting to enter a stadium to watch a men's volleyball match.

The move came in advance of this year's Asian Men's Volleyball Championship. It was not immediately clear if the Asian Volleyball Confederation (AVC), the organizer of the Asian tournament scheduled to be held in Tehran this summer, would fall into line with FIVB policy

In an emailed statement, the FIVB said it was "a step in the right direction." The group added that it was "gratifying to see that the dialogue between the FIVB and the Iranian authorities last year has yielded some positive progress." The FIVB described the concession as "an evolution, not a solution." It said "there is still work to be done before Iranian volleyball is fully in line with the Olympic Charter - in particular with Fundamental Principle 6 on non-discrimination. The FIVB maintains that all women should be allowed to watch and participate in volleyball on an equal basis."

In a similar move, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) rejected a Saudi proposal to jointly host an Olympic Games with Bahrain. The suggestion floated by Saudi Prince Fahad bin Jalawi Al Saud, a member of the Saudi ruling family, involved men and women competing in separate tournaments. Al Saud suggested the men's Olympics could be held in the kingdom while women could compete in neighbouring Bahrain.

'Our society can be very conservative. It has a hard time accepting that women can compete in sports, especially in swimming. Wearing sports clothing in public is not really allowed. For these cultural reasons, it is difficult to bid for certain big international events,' Al Saud said.

IOC president Thomas Bach dismissed the idea out of hand, saying "a commitment to non-discrimination" would be mandatory for all future Olympics hosts. "If this is not applied, the bid would not be admissible. Countries like Saudi Arabia must really work to allow female athletes to freely participate," Bach said. IOC spokesman Mark Adams added that "you cannot simply outsource certain issues to another territory."

Earlier, Saudi Arabia, which has no physical education in girl's schools and forces women's sports clubs to operate in a legal nether land with no official support, rejected a demand by Bach that Saudi women be allowed to compete in all Olympic categories.

Mohammed al-Mishal, the secretary-general of Saudi Olympic Committee, said after a meeting last September between Bach and Saudi Olympic chief Prince Abdullah bin Mosaad bin Abdul-Aziz that women would be limited to sports endorsed by a literal interpretation of the Qur'an. The Saudi official said the kingdom was training women to compete in equestrian, fencing, shooting, and archery Olympic contests which are "accepted culturally and religiously in Saudi Arabia".

With pressure increasing, Iran and Saudi Arabia have joined Qatar, which won the right to host the 2022 World Cup, in the sports associations' firing line. Qatar has been under fire for its treatment of migrant workers almost from the day it won its World Cup bid in late 2010.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter, in the run-up to the group's presidential election this spring, said earlier this month that human rights would be a criterion in awarding future World Cup hosting rights. Blatter's pledge was a response to persistent criticism of the decision to allow Qatar to host the tournament.

Theo Zwanziger, the FIFA executive committee member in charge of monitoring Qatari progress on the labour issue, has expressed doubt about the sincerity of Qatari promises to reform its kafala or sponsorship system that puts employees at the mercy of their employers.

Zwanziger has warned that a failure by Qatar to establish an independent monitoring committee that had been proposed by a Qatar-sponsored study conducted by law firm DLA Piper could lead to a resolution being tabled at the FIFA congress calling for the withdrawal of Qatar's right to host the World Cup.

German football federation president Wolfgang Niersbach, who could succeed Zwanziger in his Qatar monitoring position on behalf of FIFA, recently argued that the Gulf state should allow groups like Amnesty International or the International Trade Union Confederation to monitor labour conditions on World-Cup construction sites. Niersbach suggested that it was in Qatar's interest to act quickly.

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