

COMMENTARY

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Blatter's Call on Iran to Allow Women into Stadia Reeks of Opportunism

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Campaigning for re-election, world soccer body FIFA president Sepp Blatter seems never to miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity. In an article in a FIFA magazine, Blatter commemorated International Women's Day by calling on Iran to lift its ban on women attending male sports events in stadia. In doing, so the FIFA president overlooked the fact that Iran is one of two states that bars women. The other is Saudi Arabia, which is even more restrictive given its refusal to promote woman's sports.

Blatter's oversight may not have been coincidental given his track record of support for autocratic regimes in the Middle East and North Africa. Iran is moreover an easy target in the current political environment with Israel and conservative Arab states like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates lined up against Iran.

Blatter's omission is all the more significant given that Iran and the UAE, which allows women into stadia, have entered competing bids for the hosting of the 2019 Asian Cup. Blatter's call on Iran further rings hollow given the fact that he unlike other international sports federations has not linked his urging of the Islamic republic to any sanctions if it fails to comply. Blatter has also refrained from commenting on statements earlier this year by Dato' Alex Soosay, the secretary general of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC), endorsing the Iranian ban.

While few doubt that Blatter will win re-election as FIFA president in May, highlighting the issue of women's rights in sports is important given that his main challenger, FIFA vice president and Jordanian prince Ali bin al-Hussein, is a proven proponent of women's rights.

Leading women soccer players moreover recently withdrew charges of gender discrimination in court against FIFA not because they were able to negotiate an out of court settlement but because they did not have the financial muscle to confront an intransigent soccer body.

Blatter's appeal to Iran comes after 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. It also comes after protests in January during the Asian Cup against the Iranian ban. Protesters raised banners in support of a 25-year old British-Iranian national, Ghoncheh Ghavami, who was initially arrested last year for attempting with a group of women to enter a stadium to watch a men's volleyball match. Ghavami was later released from solitary confinement pending trial.

Blatter's appeal further follows on the recent use by AFC president Sheikh Salman Bin Ebrahim al-Khalifa, a fervent supporter of the FIFA czar, of a proposal to recognize Central Asia as a separate soccer region in Asia at the expense of the post of a woman AFC vice president. That post is currently held by Australian Moya Dodd, a prominent reformer whose views challenge those held by Salman and Soosay.

Blatter's failure to mention Saudi Arabia is all the more curious given the kingdom's refusal to endorse women's football even if it tolerates the existence of women playing the game in a legal nether land. It also ignores the fact that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) is adopting a tougher line toward Saudi Arabia.

The IOC recently 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. IOC frustration with Saudi Arabia was also evident after the kingdom rejected an IOC demand that it allow women to compete in all Olympic categories.

Blatter has yet to respond to Iran's reaction to his call for the lifting of the ban on women in stadia which was identical to its response to the volleyball federation and was rejected by the FIVB. Iranian Football Federation president Ali Kafashian said Iran would allow foreign but not Iranian women into stadia when international matches are played. "We have problems regarding the presence of women in stadiums, but in relation to foreigners, we are looking at how to solve the problems," Kafashian said.

Kafashian went on to say that the AFC had "requested certain facilities that we have agreed to supply." It was not clear what those facilities were. If Iran's staging of the AFC's Under-16

Championship in 2012 is anything to go by, Iranian promises need to be taken with a grain of salt.

The AFC said at the time that it had received assurances from Kafashian that Iran would comply with AFC regulations. The AFC quoted Kafashian as saying at the drawing of the groups for the tournament that his federation is “fully ready to follow all the requirements and instructions from AFC.” The Iranian soccer boss repeated his position in remarks to Iranian reformist newspaper Sharq. In an editorial the newspaper said “the youth championships could create a great change in Iranian football. They are an excellent opportunity.” Iran failed to fulfil what the AFC thought was a promise to let women watch tournament matches without restrictions.

In his FIFA article, Blatter said that he had raised the ban on women in 2013 with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, “and came away with the impression that this intolerable situation could change over the medium term. However, nothing has happened. A collective ‘stadium ban’ still applies to women in Iran, despite the existence of a thriving women’s football organization. This cannot continue. Hence, my appeal to the Iranian authorities: Open the nation’s football stadiums to women!”

It will take more than a verbal statement to persuade either Iran or Saudi Arabia to lift restrictions on women’s sports. To achieve that, Blatter would have to put a sufficiently high price tag on their failure to do so. Nothing indicates that the FIFA president is willing to put his money where his mouth is.

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/2015/03/blatters-call-on-iran-to-allow-women.html>

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