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SPORTSWASHING IN THE GULF

WHAT SHOULD OUR GOVERNMENTS DO ABOUT IT?

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Summary

The FIFA World Cup in Qatar has highlighted the phenomenon of sportswashing and the problems that are associated with it. Upon winning the bid to host the competition in 2010, there have been continual critiques of the country's human rights records, treatment of journalists, and the persecution of homosexuality. It has shown that more must be done to stop sportswashing in the future.

Key points

- FIFA and other international sporting organisations are operating without any oversight or regulations, allowing them to centralise power with a small number of people.
- Governments must pressure these organisations to not allow this form of soft power projection from states looking to cover up their human rights abuses.

While sportswashing has been occurring for the better part of a century, it does not mean that it should have a place in international sporting competitions. Sport should be focused on creating communities and bringing people together, not as a tool for regimes to reimagine themselves on a world stage. Sportswashing is a form of subtle propaganda involving the acquisition of sports clubs, federations, or tournaments by oppressive regimes and corporations. Governments and current and former athletes must work together to create better checks and balances in international sporting organisations.

Gulf States Influence in European Football

The take-over of the Manchester City Football Club in 2008 by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan of Abu Dhabi signalled the rise of Gulf States and their respective state-owned entities sponsoring and buying shares in some of Europe's largest football clubs. The most recent example of this happened last year in October, with Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, chaired by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, became the majority owner of Newcastle United (Ogden & Bonagura, 2022). Through the sponsoring and owning of football clubs with large fan bases, it provides the owners with a willing army of supporters that will go into stadiums and post on social media on the owners behalf. This gives the Gulf States a new section of propaganda foot soldiers who will loyally support them as long their team is achieving good results.

The acquisition of football teams with millions of fans spread all over the world significantly amplifies the publicity and contributes to the global recognition of all the Gulf States that are involved. In addition to serving as prestige investments, broadcasting rights, and opportunities to organise tournaments and friendly games in their countries, it allows these states to promote their national agenda whilst providing opportunities for economic diversification. To best illustrate the quick rise in prominence of Gulf States in European football is to look at the United Arab Emirates national airline, Emirates, whose investment was virtually non-existent ten years ago. It has now emerged as the third largest sponsor of European football, investing more than \$175 million Euro annually across several major deals (Akkas, 2021).

Qatar World Cup

Almost immediately after Sepp Blatter opened the fateful envelope and made the announcement that Qatar would be the host of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, there were questions surrounding the process. Qatar has never been a footballing nation and has never qualified for the World Cup. The country also has a history of human rights abuses, limited press freedom, and little to no rights for women and the LGBTQ+ community. On top of this, in the twelve years leading up to the tournament, the Guardian has reported that there have been at least 6,500 migrant worker deaths in the country on projects related to the World Cup (Pattison & McIntyre, 2021). Qatar has an extremely poor record when it comes to worker rights due to the Kafala system, which legally binds migrant workers to their employers. This system has allowed for there to be widespread and rampant worker abuse, leading to several human rights violations including living in communities without basic amenities such as running water, working electricity, and sewage (Conway, 2013). This is one of the problems with sportswashing projects: the country attempting to sportswash is not improving its human rights record, instead, it is hoping the world will be blinded to it.

Through hosting the World Cup, Qatar is hoping to project a cosmopolitan image like its Gulf neighbours, showing it is able to welcome tourists and become a player in global politics going forth (Bennett & Vietor, 2022). However, while this is what the host state hopes to achieve, it is essential that the global community does not overlook the human cost that has affected migrant workers, women, and all other minorities that have been persecuted in the country. The global community must continue to scrutinise Qatar and push for reforms so that the controversies that have occurred do not happen at the next international sporting event.

Ramifications of Sportswashing

By allowing sportswashing to occur in major international sports, we as a community who enjoy watching sports are enabling oppressive regimes, who already have control of the press in their homeland, to bypass criticism of the foreign media. This has been no better exemplified than in March of this year when the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia executed 81 people in a single day. The following day, fans of Newcastle United waved Saudi Arabian flags throughout their 1-0 defeat to Chelsea (Higgins, 2022). This is a prime example of the enforced ignorance that is brought about by highly strategic sportswashing projects.

Another example of the effects of successful sportswashing occurred in the early days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Chelsea fans began cheering and chanting for their Russian owner Roman Abramovich during a minute of silence for the Ukrainians who were killed (Higgins, 2022). This is another of many examples of how powerful people and regimes have been able to convert sports fans into their own propaganda soldiers, spouting support for whatever their owners want as long as they provide the funds for their team to do well on the field.

Independent media serves as both a tool for the proliferation of sportswashing, and as the biggest threat to its success. If sportswashing is allowed to flourish, it will see the demise of independent, critical, free media, as is already occurring in Qatar. Already in this World Cup, there have been incidents of Qatari officials forcing journalists to stop recording, presenting the news, and interviewing the public (Couzens & Blow, 2022). The ramifications for allowing sportswashing to continue will mean a continuation of blatant human rights abuses by these regimes, as they are not being held accountable on the world stage, and instead are being supported around the world by the fans of clubs that they own.

Issues Surrounding FIFA

Throughout its century long history, FIFA has been plagued with various accusations of corruption (Kunti, 2019), as the organisation has grown and operated outside of international laws and regulations. FIFA has allowed corrupt and authoritarian regimes to host its most important event, the World Cup. This has been occurring since 1934, when the tournament was held in Mussolini's fascist Italy. The corruption has never been clearer than in the lead up to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, as several members of the FIFA Executive Committee were charged or found guilty of corruption charges when voting on what country should host the tournament (Panja & Draper, 2022).

Because of the lack of accountability for the top FIFA officials, it has seen them opt for nations that can provide the most funding for the World Cup, instead of more democratic countries. This has been evident in the bids for Russia and Qatar to host the tournament as both countries put

significant money into it, with the hopes of portraying a different image than the authoritarian regimes.

Recommendations

- Our governments must push for reform in FIFA so that authoritarian regimes cannot hijack international sporting events to improve their image on a global stage while continuing to implement their authoritarian policies in their home nations.
- One of the tools that can be utilised in stopping sportswashing is changing the bidding process for how countries apply to host these events. This could be done so that hopeful hosts of tournaments or club owners have to rebut allegations as a part of their bid, showing either that no such major political-moral issues exist, at least to no greater degree than the majority of places, or that they have clear plans to address those issues through reform and reparation (Wojtowicz, Fruh & Archer, 2022).
- Reforming these organisations can be modelled off of the World Anti-Doping Agency (Stromberg, 2015). This organisation is jointly overseen by governments and people from the sporting world, including athletes. This would help to hold these organisations accountable as there would be outside regulators.
- The critiques of Qatar cannot end when the tournament is over. Pressure must be continuously applied even after. It is important to ensure Qatar live up to their word and improve migrant worker conditions and other promises they have made to ensure further equality in the country.
- Supporters of football teams, whether domestic or international, must put aside their love for their team and assess whether the owners are manipulating them for their own propaganda purposes. There should be an overhaul of the current system to put in better checks and balances for potential owners and hosts of international tournaments. This would see the national governments of football leagues introducing stricter measures for who could purchase teams. Such measures could include stricter financial fair play laws to ensure that the money used to purchase teams is not coming from illicit or non-democratic means.
- FIFA and similar sporting organisations must be reformed. There must be some accountability, so these events do not occur in countries that are manipulating them for political purposes. The global community should work together in creating better regulations for such organisations.
- If tournaments such as the World Cup are to continue to be a uniting force in the world, it is essential that the freedom of media is protected so that people can be informed of what is occurring. There must be better protection than seen in the Qatar tournament.

If organisations such as FIFA are not held accountable for cosying up to authoritarian regimes, who is to say that the next FIFA World Cup will not be held in North Korea? Or the Olympics to be held in Myanmar?

Conclusion

Although there have been several instances of sportswashing in history, the FIFA World Cup in Qatar has been one of the most blatant attempts at it. While the event is slowly coming to its end, the world should not forget the sacrifices that the migrant workers made to make this event happen, let alone all the other human rights abuses that occur in the country. The Western world (at least) must push for reforms in FIFA to ensure that authoritarian and corrupt countries do not continue to hijack international sporting events to promote their own political agenda. Our governments must better regulate sporting organisations such as FIFA to ensure that there is more accountability, and football remains the world's game and not a tool for authoritarian regimes.

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