

1.5 Political interference, power struggles, corruption and greed: the undermining of football governance in Asia

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Football, arguably Asia's most popular sport, has been marred across the continent by multiple scandals, ranging from Asia-based criminal organisations fixing matches globally² to corruption in regional and national governance to a lack of transparency and accountability that facilitates undemocratic management³ and even boosts support for autocratic regimes.⁴ The root of the lack of good governance within the Asian Football Confederation (AFC), the continent's football governing body, as well as the Olympic Council of Asia, is corruption, enabled by the dominance over sport that is exercised by executive committee members with close political ties to often undemocratic or hybrid regimes that see football as a tool to strengthen their grip on power and project themselves internationally in a positive light.⁵

The extent of the problem is illustrated by a string of scandals, questionable actions and incidents of political manipulation in the last four years, some of which were also related to the lack of proper governance in the administration of global football by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). These have included the following:

- the 2011 banning for life from involvement in professional football of then AFC president and FIFA vice president Mohammed Bin Hammam, a Qatari national;⁶
- the burial by Sheikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa, the current AFC president and FIFA vice president, of an independent audit of AFC finances carried out by PricewaterhouseCooper (PwC) that warned of possible tax evasion, money-laundering, sanctions-busting and a series of illicit payments to national, regional and global football

- executives and questioned the integrity of a US\$1 billion master rights agreement to commercialise AFC assets, including broadcast rights, with a Singapore-based company;⁷
- the failure to act decisively on allegations that a senior AFC official had sought to tamper with or destroy documents related to corruption investigations;⁸
 - the election of an AFC president who has been tainted by allegations of involvement in the detention and torture of scores of athletes and sports officials in his native Bahrain;⁹
 - the manipulation of AFC election procedures for FIFA executive committee seats to ensure that specific candidates were successful on preferential terms;¹⁰
 - the failure to distance the AFC from endorsements of Iranian restrictions on women attending public sporting events by one of its senior officials¹¹; and
 - allegations of vote-buying in Sheikh Salman's election to the AFC presidency in 2013 that remain uninvestigated.¹²

Governance in the AFC: worsening rather than improving?

The AFC, despite its lofty statements and a pledge to establish an ethics committee,¹³ has shown no intention of institutionalising principles of good governance or fair play. If anything, its president, Sheikh Salman - a member of the Bahraini ruling family who as head of the Bahrain Football Association failed to stand up for members of the national football team who were reportedly arrested and tortured after joining a march to protest the government and has been tainted by allegations of involvement in their detention¹⁴ - has used his first two years in office to centralise power, favour his closest associates, marginalise reformers and turn his back on any attempt to clean up the organisation.¹⁵

Sheikh Salman's burial of the audit and failure to act on its recommendations has meant a lack of good governance within the AFC on multiple levels. In a taped and written statement recorded by a

FIFA security officer in July 2012 that became public in April 2015, the AFC's finance director, Bryan Kuan Wee Hoong, asserted that AFC general secretary Dato' Alex Soosay had asked him to 'tamper [with] or hide any documents' related to the general secretary that could figure in the PwC audit.¹⁶ The AFC said in a statement four days after the allegations became public that it was assessing the veracity of the allegations, yet it only collected a copy of the tape over two weeks later.¹⁷ Soosay was finally suspended in May 2015.¹⁸ The audit was commissioned by the AFC, allegedly in a bid to create a legal basis to oust Bin Hammam from his AFC presidency and FIFA vice presidency.¹⁹

The PwC report had earlier identified Soosay and Kuan as two of three AFC officials who had authorised questionable payments under Bin Hammam for which the Asian group could be held legally liable. 'Our transaction review revealed that items sampled were, in most cases, authorised by the General Secretary or Deputy General Secretary and the Director of Finance. As signatories these parties hold accountability for the authorisation of these transactions. We also note the Internal Audit and Finance Committees were aware of this practice,' the PwC report said.²⁰

Implications for governance in national associations: the case of Nepal

The lack of governance and accountability at the regional level extends to the national level as well. Take, for example, the case of Nepal, where Ganesh Thapa, who was suspended by FIFA as a member of the AFC executive committee and as head of the All Nepal Football Association (ANFA) pending an investigation into corruption charges, but still controls the group, according to ANFA board members.²¹ Similarly the AFC appointed as match commissioner Thapa's son, Gaurav, who was not suspended but was named in the PwC audit as a recipient of questionable payments from Bin Hammam.²²

Two ANFA vice presidents sent a letter to the FIFA general secretary, the AFC general secretary and a member of the ethics committee of FIFA's investigatory chamber regarding Thapa's violation of ANFA's statutes by continuing to operate during his suspension, and his failure to share critical information on ANFA, including audits, with executive members.²³ FIFA and the AFC have yet to respond to the letter.²⁴

The overlap of politics and governance in Asian football

The AFC's problems are rooted in the fact that, like FIFA, it is an inherently political grouping, despite its insistence on the fiction of a separation of sports and politics. As football czars, Bin Hammam and Salman emerged as two of the most senior governors of the world's most popular sport on the world's largest and most populous continent at a time when Asia's fortunes were rising. The composition of the AFC's executive committee under both men bears witness to the group's political nature, as do the boards of many of the national associations that constitute its membership.²⁵

Nowhere is this more prevalent than among the AFC's 13 Middle Eastern members, which account for 28 per cent of the confederation's 46 member associations. Six of the AFC executive committee's 21 members in the period from 2011 to 2015 hailed from the Middle East: Salman, a member of Bahrain's minority Sunni Muslim ruling family; Prince Ali Bin Al Hussein, a half-brother of Jordan's King Abdullah, who was a reformer and thorn in Salman's side; the United Arab Emirates' Yousuf Yaqoob Yousuf Al Serkal, who maintains close ties to his country's ruling elite; Sayyid Khalid Hamad Al Busaidi, a member of Oman's ruling family; Hafez Al Medlej, a member of the board of Saudi Arabia's tightly controlled football association who made his career in the kingdom's state-run media; and Palestine's Susan Shalabi Molano. That number has risen to seven in the executive committee elected in April 2015 that includes Sheikh Salman and Shalabi

Molano as well as Mohammed Khalfan Al Romaithi, deputy commander –in-chief of the Abu Dhabi police force and representatives of Kuwait, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia and the head of Islamic Republic of Iran Football Federation (IRIFF). Other members of the committee include Prince Abdullah Ibni Sultan Ahmad Shah, the crown prince of Pahang, Malaysia’s third largest state; Makhdoom Syed Faisal Saleh Hayat, who served as minister in various Pakistani governments and is a member of the Pakistan People’s Party; and North Korea’s Han Un-gyong.²⁶

Conclusions

Reform of the governance of the continent’s footballing associations will require a paradigm shift. Tinkering with reforms of the AFC’s current government structure is unlikely to tackle the group’s fundamental, long-standing problems that are embedded in its corporate culture. To achieve this paradigm shift, the AFC will have to ensure that management is expanded at the club, national and regional levels so that it includes all stakeholders, including players and fans. The AFC, like other regional and international sports associations, will have to develop principles enshrined either in a charter or a code of conduct that governs the relationship between sports and politics, addressing proportional representation. These would have to provide the safeguards against soccer governance being politically manipulated or driven as well as proper oversight of the relationship to guarantee the sport’s independence as well as its transparent and accountable management. To ensure sound rules and regulations for international tournaments, the AFC should consider the criteria for the awarding of mega events from the International Olympic Committee’s 2020 Agenda. This reform should incorporate international human labour and gender rights and standards; increase public engagement in the national and host city decision-making processes; and enhance the transparency of the infrastructural requirements for hosts, and the terms of the agreement between the sports association and the host.

Notes

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- ³ The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, 'AFC suspends General Secretary as it keeps damning audit buried', 13 May 2015, <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.sg/2015/05/afc-suspends-general-secretary-as-it.html>.
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- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ Heidi Blake and Jonathan Calvert, *The Ugly Game: The Qatari Plot to Buy the World Cup* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2015); James M. Dorsey, 'The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer', <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/2011/07/qatars-bin-hammam-banned-for-life-faces.html>.
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²¹ The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, 2 May 2015 ('AFC's Salman re-elected').

²² The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, 29 April 2015; The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, 25 April 2015 ('Alleged AFC cover-up').

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²⁴ Interview by the author with ANFA Vice President Karma Tsering Sherpa, 16 May 2015.

²⁵ Six of the AFC executive committee's 21 members in the period from 2011 to 2015 hailed from the Middle East. They included Salman, a member of Bahrain's minority Sunni Muslim ruling family; Prince Ali Bin Al Hussein, a half-brother of Jordan's King Abdullah who has emerged as a reformer and thorn in Salman's side; the United Arab Emirates' Yousuf Yaqoob Yousuf Al Serkal who maintains close ties to his country's ruling elite; Sayyid Khalid Hamed Al Busaidi, a member of Oman's ruling family; Hafez Al Medlej, a member of the board of Saudi Arabia's tightly controlled soccer association who made his career in the kingdom's state-run media; and Palestine's Susan Shalabi Molano. That number has risen to seven in the executive committee elected in April 2015 that includes Sheikh Salman and Shalabi Molano as well as Mohammed Khalfan Al Romaithi, deputy commander-in-chief of the Abu Dhabi police force and representatives of Kuwait, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia and the head of Islamic Republic of Iran Football Federation (IRIFF).