

Forget Sports: Geopolitics is Behind the FIFA Scandal As the War Against Russia Enters a New Front

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There is no question that there is a lot of corruption inside the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). Bribes and behind the scene deals have been going on for decades. The sport federation is responsible for the most watched and popular sport in the world and is part of a lucrative business venture that has a lot of soft power and prestige attached to it.

The scandal and arrests that have taken place in 2015, however, have nothing to do with corruption and everything to do with geopolitics. Welcome to the soccer/football front! FIFA has become another arena for the multi-spectrum war being fought by the US and its allies against countries like Russia. The energy and currency wars are now being augmented by a behind the scenes war at FIFA. Joseph Blatter or Sepp is a casualty of this war.

As far back as 2005, Blatter has refused to get embroiled in Washington's geopolitical chess game(s). Under him FIFA refused to surrender to the US Department of State's demands that Iran's team be blocked from participating in World Cup 2006 or demands that Palestine not be admitted into FIFA. FIFA's geopolitical offenses, however, may have reached a tipping point.

FIFA's consideration of Palestinian requests to suspend Israel, on the basis of Israeli sabotage and attacks against the Palestinian team, as item fifteen of the agenda of its 65th Congress could have been one of these offenses. Days before the 65th FIFA Congress was to take place, however, Blatter met with both Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian quasi-dictator Mahmoud Abbas to reach some type of understanding. This may be the basis for the withdrawal of the Palestinian Football Association's motion to suspend the Israeli Football Association from FIFA.

Not only were both the US and Britain upset that they were not awarded the statuses of hosting World Cup 2018 and World Cup 2022, but they have been pressuring FIFA against Russia. What may have led to Washington's campaign to remove Blatter by organizing a coup inside FIFA against the FIFA boss was FIFA's refusal to sanction Russia by getting on board with the US and EU program against Moscow.

Washington's Attack on FIFA

Just days after he was re-elected on May 29, 2015 to continue heading FIFA for a fifth term by the majority of delegates at the 65th FIFA Congress, Joseph Blatter took the unusual step of announcing that he was stepping down as the international sport federation's president

on June 2, 2015. The move was unusual, because up until his May re-election Blatter had managed to overcome the pressure and attempts by the US and its allies to force him to resign from the presidency of FIFA. He announced that he had taken the decision because he did not have everyone's support for his continued presidency in FIFA during a press conference at FIFA's headquarters in Zurich, Switzerland.

One hundred and thirty-three out of two hundred and nine association representatives at the 65th FIFA Congress voted for Blatter in the first round of voting at the Hallenstadion in Zurich. This amounts to 63.6%, or roughly 64%, of the FIFA Congress. Since this number was just short of two-thirds or 66% of FIFA's voting members needed to secure a first round win, a second round of voting was to commence.

FIFA Vice-President for Asia and runner-up, Prince Ali bin Al-Hussein bin Al-Talal bin Abdullah, had no chance of winning and dropped out of the election before a second round of voting took place. Prince Ali had managed to secure only seventy-three votes in the first round. This means that 34.9% (approximately 35%) of FIFA supported Prince Ali's bid to run FIFA as its new president.

Despite the fact that he had secured the support of the majority of soccer/football associations at the FIFA elections, Blatter was still coerced into announcing his resignation. After his re-election by the 65th FIFA Congress, reports published by the *New York Times*, ABC News, and *Reuters* all announced that Blatter was now being criminally investigated by US authorities. «Blatter had for days tried to distance himself from the controversy, but several United States officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity,» admitted that they wanted to build a case against him by using FIFA colleagues of his that they had arrested earlier (Sam Borden, Michael S. Schmidt, and Matt Apuzzo, «Sepp Blatter Decides to Resign as FIFA President in About-Face,» *New York Times*, 2 June 2015).

Prior to the investigation on Blatter, the US had the Swiss police arrest seven FIFA officials at the Hotel Baur au Lac in Zurich on May 27, 2015. These officials were in Zurich preparing to cast their ballots for the FIFA elections. They were arrested on «suspicions» of corruption and extradited to the US by Switzerland.

The US actually accelerated its investigation even while a separate probe was being conducted by the authorities in Switzerland as to how FIFA awarded World Cup 2018 to Russia and World Cup 2022 to Qatar. This is the crux of the matter. FIFA was not willing to rescind its decisions and follow Washington's geopolitical script against Russia.

The timing of the raids and arrests occurred twenty-four hours before FIFA's elections. The arrests were deliberately planned to prevent Blatter from being re-elected. Blatter responded by saying, «No one is going to tell me that it was a simple coincidence, this American attack two days before the elections of FIFA. It doesn't smell good.»

The Politicization of FIFA: Dividing the World

The contours of geopolitical rivalries and divisions are manifesting themselves in FIFA. While El Salvador and Honduras fought a war ignited by soccer/football in 1969, what is happening behind the scenes with the FIFA scandal is giving new meaning to «Soccer/Football War.»

Although the voting at the Hallenstadion was conducted by secret ballot, there is a general understanding of how the FIFA delegates and regional confederacies voted. Aside from

Australia, all forty-seven members of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) are believed to have voted for Blatter. The AFC made strong statements of support for Blatter since the scandal broke. The fifty-four members of the Confédération Africaine de Football/Confederation of African Football (CAF), which is the largest FIFA confederation, also all voted for Blatter and made strong shows of support for him like the AFC.

The Union des Associations Européennes de Football/Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) and the US on the other hand were hostile towards Blatter. EU politicians, including British Prime Minister David Cameron, had been demanding he resign as the president of FIFA. UEFA even threatened to cut ties with FIFA if Blatter was re-elected. The English Football Association also called for a boycott of the World Cup. The campaign against Blatter reached a point where Sepp said that UEFA was involved in an unnecessary demonization campaign.

UEFA, however, was not united against Blatter. «UEFA is divided: a quarter of its members apparently voted for Mr Blatter, defying a plea from Michel Platini, UEFA's head, to oust the Swiss septuagenarian. Among those who backed the incumbent were Russia, Spain and, less predictably, France, Mr Platini's own country. So UEFA action is, alas, unlikely to extend much beyond removing co-operation from FIFA committees,» the *Economist* reported («Untangling FIFA's mysteries,» 2 June 2015).

Aware of what was happening behind the scenes, the Russian Federation, at both the FIFA level and the political level of the Kremlin, voiced its strong support for Joseph Blatter. Vladimir Putin even leapt to support Blatter. Aside from France, Spain, and Russia, as many as eighteen UEFA members, including Armenia, Belarus, Finland, and Kazakhstan are believed to have supported Blatter during the voting in Zurich («'Little point' to divided Uefa talks on Sepp Blatter, says Dutch football association,» *Dutch News*, 2 June 2015).

The US and Canada were also isolated among the Confederation of North, Central America, and Caribbean Association Football (CONCACAF). The CONCACAF countries of Central America and the Caribbean put their support behind Blatter.

Are the US and EU Fighting Corruption or Fighting Democratization in FIFA?

In Orwellian terms, the press in the US and Britain have tried to portray Blatter's projects to enhance the standing of soccer/football in Africa and Asia through investment and development projects as a form of «bribery.» Even critics admit that the equal division of profits between the two hundred and nine members of FIFA generated by revenues and tournaments «has prompted many a genuine football revolution in the developing world» (Tom Peck, «Fifa corruption: How Sepp Blatter buys support by investing Fifa's millions in Africa,» *Independent* [London], 28 May 2015).

Mauritania provides an excellent case study of how the equal division of profits among all of FIFA's members, starting in 2013, has helped poorer countries improve the standing of soccer/football. To enhance the profile of the sport, studios were built to provide Mauritians the opportunity to watch the sport from television. Two paragraphs published in the *Independent* (*ibid*) relay what occurred:

- «We now have a TV production unit, one of the first of its kind in Africa,» explained the president of the Mauritanian Football Association, Ahmed Ould Yahya, at the time. «We've signed a contract with the national broadcasting company and we show

matches every week. That is really changing the image of the game in the country.»

- Before the money arrived, Mauritanian football had effectively collapsed. It had never played in an international tournament, and fallen out of the world rankings. It is still struggling, but now it also has pitches and facilities, all paid for by Fifa. Mauritania has never played in a World Cup, but has had its share of the profits. All 209 Fifa member nations receive an equal share of the income from the tournament in Brazil in 2014, around \$1.2m (£783,000).

The above is being billed as a form of bribery. Not once is the deep corruption involved in UEFA or the European Union ever mentioned. This has prompted observations that aside from geopolitics, this is an issue of power and economics. The following excerpt illustrates this point: «‘The past two editions of the World Cup have been played in South Africa and Brazil. The next one is in Russia. All three are BRICS countries. It’s obvious that the west is not very happy with this. All this talk about corruption is an attempt by Europe and America to bring the game back into their sphere of influence,’ says Thiago Cassis, a reputed Brazilian football writer. ‘There is a lot of corruption in European football too. They do not talk about it. This whole game is not about tackling corruption, but regaining control...» (Shobhan Saxena, «Make No Mistake, the FIFA War is Not About Football or Corruption,» *Wire*, 31 May 2015).

«Dependent on South America and Africa for football talent, and, increasingly Asia for TV audiences, the Europeans know they are losing control» of soccer/football, the Brazilian journalist Shobhan Saxena has noted (*ibid*). «Europe wants to import all the labour from us because that gives them a global TV audience and lots of money. But they do not want to give us World Cups or share any power with us,» a FIFA delegate from Africa at the 65th FIFA Congress has explained in this regard (*ibid*).

The Reason Behind the FIFA Arrests: Pressuring Latin America against Russia

All the FIFA officials arrested before the elections in Zurich were Latin Americans from Central America and South America. Aside from their own corruption investigations, this has prompted both resentment and backlash in CONCACAF and the Confederación Sudamericana de Fútbol/South American Football Confederation (CONMEBOL).

The Wire gives the Latin American perspective on why the US and its allies targeted the Latin Americans in FIFA. «Why did they arrest officials only from our federations and that too in Switzerland? Why didn’t they approach our governments through Interpol? Is it because they knew that extradition from South America to US is impossible?» one of Brazil’s soccer/football official asks (*ibid*).

This account points to an organized effort to derail FIFA with a coup: «There was also anger about reports in the western media about the CBF chief Marco Polo Del Nero ‘fleeing’ Zurich for Brazil as he ‘feared’ arrest. In fact, when papers like the *Guardian* and *New York Times* were reporting Del Nero’s ‘escape’ from the FIFA meeting, the Brazilian official was still in Switzerland. ‘They brought all this pressure on us to force us to vote for Prince Ali. They have been lobbying with us for months. When they didn’t see it working, they conducted the raid followed by veiled threats to others that they could be arrested too. Some British and American journalists were part of this pressure tactic,’ the Brazilian official alleged» (*ibid*).

Rescinding the Selection of Russia as the Venue for World Cup 2018

What it comes down to is World Cup 2018 in Russia. The Latin American perspective is the following: «From the versions of the Zurich raid given by some South American officials, it appears that the FBI, Swiss police and a few western reporters hunted them together,» Saxena reports (*ibid*). He was also told by one FIFA delegate from South America that the US was trying to pressure the Latin Americans. «As the Asian and African vote was solidly behind Blatter, they wanted the votes from the Americas for Prince Ali. They were desperate to make the prince the new chief of FIFA as he could re-open the bids for the 2018 and 2022 tournaments,» testifies the Paraguayan official (*ibid*). «Since the UK and the US lost the 2018 and 2022 bids respectively, they have been working to somehow cancel the World Cups in Russia and Qatar. They haven't accepted the fact that they lost the bids in a fair contest» the same official has explained (*ibid*).

Prince Ali, who is also the head of both the Jordanian Football Association and the West Asian Football Federation, was the candidate that Blatter's opponents in the US and Britain had put forward to implement their agenda. The US, Britain, and the leadership of UEFA had for months been actively lobbying for Prince Ali against Sepp Blatter. True to his pedigree, like the other so-called «royals» of the Hashemite scion in Jordan, Prince Ali is a puppet or a «stooge» that represents US and British interests as one anonymous Brazilian official told Saxena in an interview (*ibid*).

The whole FIFA scandal is not about corruption or dignity. The whole affair is about geopolitics and managing the world. Joseph Blatter was forced to step down because FIFA refused to cancel its decision to allow Russia to host World Cup 2018 and to reopen the bids for hosting World Cup 2018 and World Cup 2022.

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