

The Endless Game: FIFA's Corruption Gambit

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"As predictable as it is depressing. All those FIFA members that voted for Blatter have betrayed the game they are supposed to cherish." Gary Lineker, *The Express*, May 29, 2015

When the world's football federation FIFA makes more news than usual about its habitual state of corruption, something has definitely fallen. Earlier in the week, it came in the form of arrests. These were not minor encounters of a banal kind. They were targeted efforts on the part of such organisations as the Internal Revenue Service and FBI in the United States.

Much of this has nothing to do with football. When deals are made and accounts emptied or stacked, the kick on the field is worth less than the chime of money in the offshore bank account. The *New York Times* gives a sense of this on one figure. "Chuck Blazer was a powerful figure in international soccer, and he enjoyed the trappings that came with the role: two apartments at Trump Tower in Manhattan, expensive cars, luxury properties in Miami and the Bahamas." [1]

All of that, and no personal income tax returns. Enter, then, the enthusiasm of Steve Berryman of the IRS to commence a criminal investigation in Los Angeles into Blazer's activities in 2011.

On the other side of the country, John Penza and Jared Randell of the FBI were conducting their own investigation with links to a Russian organized-crime case in December 2010. The same figures started cropping up in their inquiries. Gradually, both the FBI and the IRS found the same page of activity, links and associations. As did the US Justice Department, which developed a keen interest in examining the connections between bribed individuals and securing broadcasting and advertising rights in international football.

The ensuing investigation involved 33 countries, numerous diplomats and agencies, and one of the most notable cases of alleged white collar criminality in history. Fourteen individuals were indicted for an assortment of kickback schemes and kickbacks. Seven senior FIFA officials were arrested in Switzerland on Wednesday alone, while sports media and promotion figures were also targeted.

FIFA has existed as an anthropological aberration. It has developed its own micro-culture, its own legally flexible appraisals. Investigations into its practices tend to quietly die. Findings are buried, if not distorted. Efforts to root out corruption are treated with airy contempt.

Nothing better illustrates this than the tenure of Sepp Blatter. His survival as FIFA president for a fifth term on Friday was no surprise except to those who have gone through the same song and dance each time matters of reform crop up.

Blatter does what only he can. Raised in this climate, the mutations and adaptations are irresistible. He speaks with another language, articulating an amoral world from the other

side of the moon. FIFA morality tends to be like that. Besieged by the accountants, the revenue snatchers, and those who seemingly disapprove of their behaviour, Blatter can paint this anti-corruption effort as an anti-FIFA move, in fact, a move against football in general. Such seedy hypocrisy is bound to fly in some circles.

It did look at one point that Blatter would be ambushed by growing support for his opponent, Prince Ali bin al-Hussein of Jordan. US Soccer president Sunil Gulati openly threw in his lot with the Jordanian contender. Other presidents also signalled their move to back the prince over the chief. The most concerned of all was Michel Platini of UEFA, who has threatened at stages to withdraw from FIFA.

From the start, this was a false signal, the mooted discontent that enabled the FIFA machine to resist like an organic phenomenon determined to survive. In due course, Blatter won, marshalling the interests, quelling the potential dissenters. This, despite the promise of more indictments from the chief of the IRS, Richard Weber. Better the moneyed devil and patron you know, than the clean broom you don't.

In Blatter's own words, he will be the captain, taking control of matters. "For the next four years I will be in command of this boat called FIFA and we will bring it back ashore, we will bring it back to the beach." [2] Presumably if it doesn't sink.

No wonder England's football veteran striker and commentator Gary Lineker could express fear of presenting the fabled quiz program *Have I Got New For You*. "Shat on chair," he tweeted after the recording session. "Shat on desk." [3] While Lineker was contemplating the contents of his bowels, former presidential candidate Luis Figo was contemplating the overall state of football. "FIFA has lost, but above everything, football has lost and everyone who truly cares about it has lost too." [4]

This betrays a fundamental mistake in understanding the architecture of international football. This is the hospital that functions without patients; the university which operates without students. FIFA only needs its players in abstract form – to amble on the field, to score goals, to sign contracts. It is precisely for that reason that someone like Blatter does not so much survive as thrive. FIFA is its own bureaucratic incentive, its own excuse for existence.

Blatter remains the untouchable, the unchallengeable, though not as conclusively as he would have liked with the 133-73 margin. (His Jordanian counterpart did not have the stomach to take it to a second round.) He remains the colossus of a system, the same system that spawned him, and to a large extent, his rivals. "Mr. Blatter survived," surmised *The Guardian's* editorial, "because so many interests, not just his own, are bound into a system over which he presides." They are the symbiotic realisations of a world view – that of remote sports authoritarians, and ultimately, appalling governance. One doesn't reform FIFA by removing Blatter. One reforms it by abolishing the organisation altogether.

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Note

[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/30/sports/soccer/more-indictments-expected-in-fifa-case-irs-official-says.html?smid=tw-bna&_r=0

[2] <http://www.theguardian.com/football/2015/may/30/warning-of-more-fifa-corruption-charges-as-sepp-blatter-retains-presidency>

[3] <http://www.express.co.uk/entertainment/tv-radio/580987/Gary-Lineker-Have-I-Got-News-For-You-Fifa-scandal-Ian-Hislop-Sepp-Blatter>

[4] http://www.express.co.uk/sport/football/580978/UEFA-Sepp-Blatter-FIFA-presidential-vote?_ga=1.186825000.1215159238.1432966091

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