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Something needs to change within FIFA

Never before has a World Cup been so controversial — but change in international football is only possible if systemic problems at FIFA are addressed

On Sunday, the 2022 FIFA World Cup tournament began in Qatar. In the run-up to the event, FIFA boss Gianni Infantino had already declared it to be the 'best World Cup of all time'. Even before he moved to Qatar at the beginning of the year, there was no question that, as the person in charge, he was in no way a neutral observer. The close links between football and politics are not only evident from the example of FIFA itself, but also when looking more closely at the Qatar World Cup.

This is an exceptional tournament in many respects. Qatar has replaced Switzerland as the geographically smallest country to have ever hosted a World Cup. It is the first tournament since the World Cup began in 1930, in which the host country has never actually played a World Cup match. Furthermore, it is the first World Cup to be held in an Arab country. But the fact that it is taking place in Qatar, of all places, is also astonishing from a regional perspective. After all, the strongholds of Arab football are found in Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, both in terms of the quality of the players and the number of spectators in the stadiums.

At first glance it would also seem that this is the first World Cup to be held outside of summer, during which temperatures can reach up to 50 degrees in Qatar. However, this is applicable only from a European perspective. For example, the 2014 World Cup in Brazil and 2010 World Cup in South Africa took place in the winter of the southern hemisphere.

Qatar's central motive behind the bid to host the World Cup is that the country wants to present itself as an indispensable partner on the world map. At the same time, however, the World Cup also serves to secure power over the host country's own population. Qatar sees an existential threat in its overpowering neighbour Saudi Arabia. Since Qatar is a small country, it can hardly protect itself militarily. The idea, therefore, is for

Qatar to enter into close partnerships in a wide range of areas in order to increase its importance. In political science, this is referred to as 'soft power', in contrast to 'hard' military power.

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For the US, Qatar is an indispensable partner because it is home to the largest US military base in the Middle East. In March 2022, US President Biden declared the country a 'major Non-NATO ally', a formal title given to only a few states of particularly important strategic significance.

Qatar's regional political involvement poses a more serious issue for the rivalry between Qatar on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on the other. In the course of the Arab Spring and thereafter, Qatar supported Islamist movements in many countries. The UAE and the Saudis saw this as a potential threat to their own rule. In addition, Qatar maintains relatively good relations with Iran, which the UAE and Saudi Arabia perceive as the greatest threat to regional security. Moreover, in the Libyan civil war, Qatar and the UAE are supporting opposing parties in the conflict.

In view of these circumstances, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other states from the region imposed a blockade on Qatar in order to force the country to completely realign its regional policy. Among other things, the states demanded that Qatar shut down the *Al Jazeera* television station, sever all ties with Islamist organisations and downgrade its diplomatic relations with Iran. The demands were so extensive that fulfilling them would have been tantamount to the end of Qatar's state sovereignty. Accordingly, Qatar did not comply with the demands, but found ways to circumvent the blockade. It finally ended in January 2021, with the Saudis and the UAE left unable to enforce their demands.

Corruption is not a Qatar-specific issue

The criticism in the run-up to the World Cup raises doubts as to whether Qatar will succeed as planned in using the tournament to create a positive image for itself. In this respect, one should also bear in mind that it is by no means only autocracies that attempt to use the World Cup to present themselves in a good light to the global public. The nation branding associated with it is rather a universal phenomenon that could also be observed, for example, at the 2006 World Cup. The slogan '*A time to make friends*' aimed to present Germany – contrary to widespread clichés – as a cosmopolitan and hospitable country.

The massive allegations of corruption surrounding the awarding of the World Cup to Qatar in December 2010 are well known. Accordingly, it was only the bribing of the members of the World Cup Executive Committee that ensured the World Cup was awarded to the Gulf monarchy. But this is by no means the first time that cheating has been involved in the choice of the World Cup venue. In 2015, German news website *Der Spiegel* revealed that the 2006 World Cup was awarded to Germany as a result of bribery. So in the end, the German summer fairy tale was bought. Moreover, there are indications of corruption for every World Cup tournament since 1998.

Qatar is also rightly criticised for its poor human rights standards. The country is an absolutist monarchy, with the Emir being the supreme decision-making authority. There is no freedom of the press in Qatar, and homosexuality is forbidden. In a ZDF (German public television broadcaster) documentary, a Qatari World Cup ambassador even described homosexuality as 'damage in the mind'. In addition, there is no political participation. Instead, the emirate buys the approval of its citizens through the generous payment of subsidies and granting of privileges.

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Of Qatar's nearly three million inhabitants, only about 10 per cent are Qatari citizens. The rest of the residents are migrant workers who keep the country running. Without these migrant workers, the stadiums and infrastructure for the World Cup could never have been built. They live and work under extremely precarious conditions, are poorly paid and often have their passports confiscated upon arrival in the country.

Despite all the justified criticism of the World Cup in Qatar, there is a tendency to look one-sidedly at Qatar and the abuses there and thus to ignore the ties that exist, for example, between Qatar and Germany. Since 2018, Qatar Airways has been paying FC Bayern around € 17 million a year for a logo imprint on the team's jersey sleeve. Beyond that, Qatar also invests enormous sums in European companies and thus gains massive influence. At present, Qatar has a not inconsiderable stake in *Volkswagen*, *Deutsche Bank*, *Hochtief*, *Siemens*, and *Hapag-Lloyd*. In addition, since the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022, Germany has been trying to free itself from its dependence on Russian gas. Consequently, both Economics Minister Habeck and Chancellor Scholz travelled to Qatar this year to support the conclusion of gas supply agreements there.

FIFA is part of the problem

The questionable practices surrounding the World Cup in Qatar ultimately represent only an intensification of developments that already existed previously. It is FIFA's non-transparent structures that make corruption possible in the first place. The fact that there are no clear criteria with regard to the observance of human rights for the awarding of the World Cup is a problem that goes beyond the case of Qatar.

This World Cup may therefore offer the opportunity to critically question the fundamental dynamics in international professional football and to draw appropriate lessons from them. The past few months have shown that such an opportunity for change could exist. This is also due to the fact that football fans can no longer be viewed as passive consumers only. Rather, they are now part of a critical public opposition whose voice can no longer be ignored.

At a DFB (German Football Association) event in September, fan representative Dario Minden confronted the Qatari ambassador about the lack of rights for the LGBTI community in Qatar. Minden referred to his own homosexuality, adding, 'it's normal, so get used to it or stay away from football.' Already last year, club member Michael Ott demanded at the annual general meeting of FC Bayern to discuss the sponsoring of Qatar Airways. The club bosses brought the meeting to an abrupt end, and a scandal ensued. Whether the pressure from the fans is sufficient to end the sponsorship is something Bayern officials won't decide until after the World Cup.

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And there are also rumblings within FIFA itself: at the FIFA Congress in Qatar at the end of March, the head of the Norwegian association, Lise Klaveness, stated that the world governing body must pay attention to democracy and human rights when awarding World Cups in the future. It remains to be seen whether this was just an isolated opinion or whether something can actually change within FIFA. At the very least, the DFB, together with other associations, is calling for the establishment of a compensation fund for migrant workers.

Never before has a World Cup been so intensively debated before it opened. On the one hand, it is now important that attention be paid to the human rights situation in Qatar even after the end of the tournament. On the other hand, things will only change in international

professional football if the problems inherent in the system at FIFA are addressed for the long term. In its current state, FIFA is part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Read more on the debatte around the FIFA World Cup.



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