

The Pakistani cricket match-fixing scandal

Tom Peters
21 September 2010

Pakistan's cricket team is continuing its tour of England amid a furore over the alleged bribery of some of its players. The International Cricket Council (ICC) has suspended Pakistani bowlers Mohammad Amir and Mohammad Asif and Captain Salman Butt, while the ICC's anti-corruption unit has charged the trio with "spot-fixing" during the Pakistani cricket team's fourth Test match against England on August 26.

The scandal has dominated cricket headlines internationally for over two weeks. It began with a "sting" by the British tabloid *News of the World*, which released a video apparently showing Mazhar Majeed, the players' London-based multi-millionaire agent, accepting a £150,000 bribe from an undercover reporter. In return Majeed allegedly guaranteed that Asif and Amir would bowl "no-balls" at specific times during the match.

Majeed, who was already being investigated over money-laundering allegations, was arrested and bailed by London police, who also questioned the three players. On September 17, police handed an initial file of evidence to crown prosecutors. The Pakistan Cricket Board has been ordered by Pakistan's Federal Bureau of Revenue to submit details about the players' earnings and assets.

ICC investigations are also underway into whether Pakistani players engaged in match-fixing during the World Twenty20, the Asia Cup and the January Test match in Sydney, which the Pakistani team unexpectedly and dramatically lost to Australia. *News of the World* quoted Majeed saying £1.3 million had been made from the fixing of the Sydney Test. If any team members are found guilty, they face the prospect of life-time bans from the sport.

The players have been vilified and denounced by sections of the Pakistani, British and Australian media for their supposed greed and for damaging the sport's reputation. The entire scapegoating campaign, however, aims to obscure the reality that the cricket industry, and professional sport as a whole, has long been preoccupied solely with the amassing of vast profits.

In Britain, the *News of the World* set the tone, with columnist Andy Dunn declaring that the three players had "[sold] their integrity for a few bucks" and Pakistani cricket was "a sick joke" that had to be "dragged kicking and screaming into an ethical world". He dismissed suggestions that Pakistani players should be treated with leniency because of their "impoverished backgrounds and peer pressure", pompously declaring: "The difference between moral and immoral does not have any class caveats, does not have any financial code."

Australian columnists also vented their outrage, with Peter Roebuck

from the *Age* thundering: "Let's not hear any bleating about innocent till proven guilty.... The culprits ought to be arrested and charged." The *Courier Mail's* Robert Craddock declared: "The line that corruption is so prevalent in Pakistan that the players deserve sympathy is wearing thin."

In fact, cricket players face enormous pressures. Geoff Lawson, a former coach of the Pakistani team and Australian fast bowler, wrote in the *Age* that "it would not surprise me if illegal bookmakers have told players that if they do not perform x and y, their family will be kidnapped or harmed." He explained that the 18-year-old Mohammad Amir comes from a village in the desperately poor Swat Valley, adding that "a cricketer [involved in spot-fixing] might not be thinking of personal gain but of getting money to buy a generator for his village because they don't have electricity." Lawson pointed out that Mohammad Asif "has spent a lot of his money" taking care of his sick mother.

Despite their exceptional talent, Pakistan's professional cricket players are among the lowest paid in the world, contracted for around £22,500 a year, according to the *Daily Mail*—roughly the same as Britain's average wage. The newspaper noted that Amir earns £1,300 a month, while Asif is paid £2,500. Since most cricketers retire in their thirties—if they are not forced out of the game earlier by injury—they rely heavily on sponsorship deals and prize money. Already, Amir's sponsorship deal with clothing label BoomBoom has collapsed due to the spot-fixing scandal.

Accusations of greed and corruption against the players are deeply hypocritical. While most are poorly paid, those who control the sport are invariably fabulously wealthy. The ICC's chairman, Indian Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar, who promised "to preserve the sanctity of the game" by severely punishing those players found guilty of match fixing, is the wealthiest politician in India.

England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) chairman Giles Clarke—who refused to shake hands with Mohammad Amir when presenting him with the Pakistan Man of the Series award—is a former investment banker who has appeared on the *Sunday Times'* Rich List. The ECB's worship of money was epitomised by Clarke's deal to effectively sell the English team to Texas billionaire Robert Allen Stanford in 2008 for a Twenty20 Championship against a West Indies all-star team, for prize money totalling \$US20 million. When Stanford was arrested in June 2009 for allegedly perpetrating a \$9 billion bank fraud, Clarke refused to stand down, insisting that their dealings had been above-board.

Matches and tournaments are motivated entirely by the pursuit of

profits. It is widely acknowledged that this is why the England and Wales Cricket Board has not cancelled the current tour, despite the scandal and low turnouts. The ECB has a lucrative sponsorship deal with NatWest bank and a contract with Sky television to cover the matches.

In the whole money-making enterprise, cricket players are no more than commodities to be bought and sold by rival cricket boards, which fiercely compete for their share of the revenue generated by the most talented players. Recently, Cricket Australia announced that it would arbitrarily deduct 10 percent from the salaries of any Australian players who chose to play in the rival Indian Premier League.

The vast illegal gambling and match-fixing industry, largely based in India, is mirrored by the immensely profitable legalised gambling industry in the west. In the nine months to April, the British company Sportingbet, which also operates in Australia, took almost £1.5 billion worth of bets through its phone and Internet operations. During this year's FIFA World Cup, Sportingbet took more than £50m in bets. *The Guardian* recently noted that betting is now so closely tied to Britain's sports industry that "bookmakers' logos [are printed] on the front of the shirts of Premier League footballers and the pernicious Skybet slogan [is] broadcast daily into British homes: 'It matters more when there's money on it.'"

In Australia, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reports that "sports betting ... has exploded. In May, analysts IBISWorld told the *Herald* Australians would gamble \$2.9 billion [US\$2.7 billion] on sport in 2009-10 compared with \$1.6 billion in 2004-05, with an annual growth of 12 percent for gambling on sport far more than for the pokies [poker machines] (1.2 percent) and horse racing (0.5 percent)." Major sporting bodies, including Cricket Australia, the Australian Football League, National Rugby League and the horse racing industry all share in the revenue from betting on their sports with agencies such as Betfair and TAB.

In many sports, including cricket, fluctuations in betting odds are now advertised during matches. Mark Taylor, a former Australian cricket captain, now board director of Cricket Australia (CA) and commentator for the Nine Network, defended this practice, telling the *Herald* it was "a part of business" that generated income for both the network and CA. For all their rhetoric about preserving "the sanctity of the game", the sole concern of the cricket boards is that the current match-fixing scandal will expose the parasitism on which their "business" is based.

In Pakistan, meanwhile, the spot-fixing scandal is being used to whip up nationalist sentiments among the population. Some politicians initially sought to dismiss the allegations, with Interior Minister Rehman Malik suggesting they were "a conspiracy against the team or to defame Pakistan". Pakistan's *Daily Express* said the scandal was "an Indian conspiracy" orchestrated by "the Indian bookmakers' lobby used by Azhar and Mazhar Majeed ... to tarnish Pakistan's image".

By and large, however, the media swung behind the efforts to scapegoat Amir, Asif and Butt. Editors of the *News* wrote that the players "should have been ambassadors for us at this time, instead they have stabbed us in the back". Protests have been widely reported

in which cricket fans pelted donkeys labelled with the accused players' names and burnt effigies of them. Hundreds picketed the Lahore airport when the players arrived home on September 10.

The most grotesque aspect of the campaign was the decision by the Lahore High Court to accept a petition from lawyer Ishtiaq Ahmed Chaudhry to charge Amir, Asif and Butt with treason—a charge carrying a possible death penalty. Speaking to Canada's *Globe and Mail*, Chaudhry, who described himself as "a humble person" acting "pro bono in the public interest", declared: "The whole nation is in mourning, the whole nation is grieving. We're already facing the floods and the problems of militancy. In this chaotic situation, we had no more heroes. The only heroes we had remaining were on the field of cricket; they were the ideals of the nation."

In other words, cricket players, who are built up as national "heroes" by the sporting industry and the media, are to be made scapegoats for the government's utter failure to provide aid for the 20 million people affected by what the UN describes as the worst humanitarian disaster in its 65-year history, as well as for the sectarian terrorist attacks that have spread across the country, and are largely the product of US and Pakistani military operations on the country's border with Afghanistan.

The *Times* noted that Pakistan's president Asif Ali Zardari "has been blasted for reacting slowly to the floods that have wreaked havoc in his country. His response to the allegations from the *News of the World*, a story that pushed the floods from the top of Pakistani news bulletins, was much sharper. He immediately called for a detailed report by the Pakistan Cricket Board and demanded to be kept abreast of investigations in London". Sports Minister Ijaz Jakhri described the allegations as "a matter of the honour and dignity of Pakistan" and vowed to "give exemplary punishment" to any players found guilty.

The entire spot-fixing scandal demonstrates that, like other sports, cricket has become thoroughly dominated—and corrupted—by the insatiable drive for profit. At the same time its players—elevated to celebrity status only to be vilified and dumped if and when the need arises—are utilised as a means to distract masses of ordinary working people from the problems of daily life, and to divert mounting anger and disaffection into socially regressive channels.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact