

The FIFA World Cup in Qatar: Geopolitics, money and double standards

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The fact that top class sport, including world football, is dominated by big money and power interests is no surprise to anyone. But with the World Cup in Qatar, this has reached a new stage.

The awarding of the World Cup to the Gulf state by FIFA in 2010 was a scandal at the time. Qatar is a country which has no football tradition. It has 3 million residents, but only one in 10 of these is a Qatari citizen. The country's unbearable heat made the usual summer schedule for the tournament impossible. Moreover, it is ruled by a despot who does not even allow rudimentary forms of democracy.

It was clear that huge sums of money changed hands and massive political pressure was exerted behind the scenes to bring about the decision. But Qatar was not exceptional in this regard. The awarding of the World Cup to Germany (2006), South Africa (2010) and Russia (2018) was also overshadowed by bribery and corruption.

Since the World Cup was awarded to Qatar, huge commercial deals have been concluded. FIFA alone expects revenues of \$7.5 billion, \$1 billion more than in the last World Cup in Russia. Qatar has invested over \$200 billion in the World Cup and infrastructure: \$8 billion in eight modern, air conditioned stadiums, \$16.5 billion in 140 hotels with 155,000 beds, \$36 billion in a new metro, and \$20 billion in airports, ports and motorways.

These projects were built by a huge army of workers from Asia under slave-like conditions of exploitation. Twelve-hour shifts and a seven-day work week in sweltering heat, indescribable accommodations, starvation wages, often withheld for months, confiscated passports and a ban on changing jobs were common. According to a report by the British *Guardian*, 6,750 workers from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan have died in Qatar in the 10 years since the World Cup was awarded. Amnesty International calculated that more than 15,000 foreign citizens of all ages died between 2010 and 2019. In 70 percent of these cases, the cause of death was unknown.

Meanwhile, according to a local representative of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), whose salary is paid by the Qatari government, conditions have improved somewhat. A statutory minimum wage of 1,000 Riyal (€230) per month is now in force—in one of the richest and most expensive countries in the world!

Western companies have benefited greatly from the construction boom. The German planning firm Albert Speer und Partner drew up the masterplan for the World Cup and the drafts for the eight football stadiums. Albert Speer, who died in 2017, was the son of Hitler's architect and arms minister. The elder Speer—who was tried at Nuremberg following World War II and sentenced to 20 years in prison—played a key role in the organization, direction and murderous exploitation of a European-wide slave labor force.

Qatar is also a sought-after investor. The sheikdom owns numerous real estate and luxury hotels in Britain, France and Germany and is a major shareholder in Volkswagen, RWE, Deutsche Bank, Lagardère, Vivendi, Veolia, TotalEnergies and other leading companies. The sheikdom has

also purchased the Paris Saint-Germain football club and has made it the strongest team in France by acquiring expensive world class players such as Messi, Neymar and Mbappé. Bayern Munich, the current champion of the German Bundesliga, is sponsored by Qatar.

Since the imposition of sanctions against Russian gas and oil, Qatar has also become a leading liquefied gas exporter. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Minister for Economic Affairs Robert Habeck and other international politicians made a pilgrimage to Doha this year to secure LNG deals.

Geopolitical objectives

Even more important than commercial interests for the imperialist powers are the geopolitical goals they are pursuing in Qatar. The small state in the middle of the disputed, energy-rich Gulf region is an important political and military base for them.

The US maintains its largest Middle East airbase in Al Udeid, which played a vital role in the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria and is located in the immediate vicinity of Iran. Qatar participated in the Libyan war against Muammar al-Qaddafi with its own fighter and transport aircraft. It supported Islamist terrorist groups that fuelled the civil war in Libya and were later used in Syria against the Assad regime.

If Western politicians, media and football officials now deplore the human rights situation in Qatar and call for equal rights for women and gay people, this is pure hypocrisy. The US and its European allies have killed at least one million people in the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria and have forced millions more to flee. In comparison, the authoritarian rulers of the Gulf monarchies are petty criminals.

As far as the imperialist powers are concerned, the tournament in Qatar was never in question. FIFA boss Gianni Infantino, who moved to Doha a year ago and declared at the beginning of the World Cup in a bizarre press conference that he now feels himself to be a Qatari, an Arab, an African, a homosexual, a disabled person and a migrant worker, only expresses this cynical attitude most bluntly.

The situation is different with the abhorrence of many football fans, who are honestly outraged that the World Cup is being played on the bones of their fellow workers from poorer countries. The brutal exploitation of the construction workers has also hit a nerve with them because they too are confronted with rising workloads and falling wages. In Germany, a representative survey in May 2021 found that 65 percent of respondents reject the participation of the German national team in the World Cup.

How FIFA auctioned the World Cup to Qatar

Many details are now known about how FIFA sold the World Cup to Qatar in 2010. Twenty-two of the twenty-four officials who voted at the time in favour of the decision have since been forced to leave due to corruption, with some ending up in prison. Politicians and prosecutors were ousted, and even Sepp Blatter, who dominated FIFA like a mafia don from 1998 to 2016, had to vacate his chair—only to make way for another schemer, Infantino.

The fact that these intrigues came to light at all was the result of imperialist power struggles and intrigues.

On the eve of the 2015 FIFA Congress in Zurich, the Swiss authorities arrested seven officials of the Football Association in a spectacular action at the luxury hotel Baur au Lac in Zurich on charges of corruption. They acted on behalf of the US judiciary, which had opened an investigation into FIFA for the 2010 World Cup award.

The focus was not so much on the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, but on the 2018 World Cup in Russia, which was decided on at the same 2010 meeting. After the US brought an anti-Russian regime to power in Ukraine in 2014 and Russia annexed Crimea, the US was determined to prevent the tournament from taking place in Russia. They failed, but the investigations set in motion an avalanche that was difficult to bring under control.

The US still had scores to settle in the case of Qatar. After all, they had applied for the 2022 World Cup themselves and sent a high-ranking delegation—led by ex-President Bill Clinton and actor Morgan Freeman – to Zurich. According to eyewitnesses, Clinton threw ashtrays around when he heard the result of the vote.

The decisive factor favouring Qatar was—in addition to the purchase of the votes of three South American delegates—the Frenchman Michel Platini and two other delegates, whom Platini influenced. The former football star was, at that time, president of the European football association UEFA and viewed as a possible successor to Blatter at FIFA. A few days before the FIFA vote, Platini met with French President Nicolas Sarkozy and the Emir of Qatar, Tamim Al Thani, who apparently “convinced” him to vote for Qatar.

Blatter allegedly represented the interests of the US at the time. But that didn’t save him, because he continued to support staging the 2018 World Cup in Russia. Infantino is said to have maintained close contacts with the US justice system and to have testified five months after the raid in Zurich as a witness before a grand jury in New York that investigated FIFA. He also had personal contacts with Federal prosecutor Michael Lauber, Switzerland’s top prosecutor.

Two days after the raid in Zurich, Blatter was elected head of FIFA for another term, but had to resign three days later due to pressure from the US. In the eight months leading up to the election of his successor, the Swiss judiciary also removed his most promising successor, Platini.

While it dropped most of the 25 criminal investigations, the federal prosecutor’s office charged Blatter with paying \$2 million in “consultant fees” to Platini. Although later acquitted by a court, the FIFA ethics committee subsequently imposed a perennial ban on Blatter and Platini, paving the way for Infantino, who was elected with the support of the US Association. Swiss Prosecutor Lauber later also lost his job because he met Infantino secretly several times after his election while still investigating him.

Once in office, Infantino blocked the investigation within FIFA and shut down its ethics committee. He took things even further than his predecessor Blatter, including an attempt to outsource all FIFA rights to a consortium led by Saudi Arabia.

The investigative zeal of the US judiciary also weakened after the World Cup in Russia could no longer be prevented and FIFA awarded the 2026 World Cup to North America.

Loretta Lynch, the attorney general in the Obama administration, who in 2015 initiated the investigation against FIFA, is now in the pay of FIFA

and sings hymns of praise to Infantino. In 2019, she joined the law firm Paul Weiss, which took over the representation of the football association in the FIFA Gate scandal from the law firm Quinn Emanuel.

Imperialist Alliances

Nothing now stood in the way of the World Cup taking place in Qatar. Not only does it promise fantastic business, but it also serves as a platform for the US and the European powers to forge new alliances against Russia and China. In doing so, they are courting not only Qatar, but all the Gulf monarchies and in particular Saudi Arabia, which have so far been reluctant to compensate for the failure of Russian gas and oil through higher production volumes and to embrace a course of confrontation with China.

In July, President Joe Biden was the first Western head of state to visit Saudi ruler Mohammed bin Salman since the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. At the opening game of the World Cup, Salman sat next to Infantino and the Emir of Qatar as a guest of honor. Between 2017 and 2021, Saudi Arabia and Qatar were on the verge of war.

The outrage over the murderous exploitation of Asian workers is now being deliberately downplayed. The media has instead turned its attention almost exclusively to the rights of women and gay people. “Critical” reporting is limited to the question of whether the team captains will be allowed to wear a “One Love” armband or various rainbow insignia to express opposition to homophobia. Even this purely symbolic gesture has proven too much, with the national football associations bowing to the ban imposed by FIFA, which does not want to allow its lucrative commercial and political relations with the despots of the Gulf region to be hampered.

The double standard is unmistakable. “Human rights” are invoked whenever it comes to justifying brutal imperialist wars—against Iraq, Libya, Iran, Russia, China, etc. They are ignored when it comes to the imperialists’ own human rights violations or those of allied dictators.

Football serves as a means to an end. The rottenness of capitalism, which creates social inequality, war, fascism and environmental degradation everywhere, infects all areas of society—including culture and sport. Cultural progress and real sport, which are not subject to commerce, are only possible within the framework of a struggle for socialism, advocating a society that puts the overall interest above profit interests and overcomes national borders.



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