

Australian cricketer banned from displaying “all lives are equal” on his shoes in reference to Gaza genocide

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The past two months have witnessed no shortage of egregious attacks on democratic rights. In countries such as Germany and France, protests against the unfolding Israeli genocide in Gaza have been banned in a major turn to police-state measures. Everywhere opponents of the mass murder have been threatened and vilified with lies and slander.

Even in this context, cricketing authorities have staked a claim to one of the more absurd, nasty and petty acts of censorship.

This week they banned Australian batsman Usman Khawaja from displaying the slogans “all lives are equal” and “freedom is a human right” on his shoes. Khawaja had planned to wear boots with those statements during the first Test match against Pakistan in Perth, which began on Thursday.

In a video posted to social media on Wednesday, Khawaja revealed he had been instructed by the International Cricket Council (ICC) that displaying the slogans was forbidden. The global governing body had invoked its regulations, under which no statements of a political or potentially “divisive” character can be featured on equipment without approval.

Khawaja had told the press earlier in the week that the slogans were a humanitarian, not a political statement.

It is obvious that the ICC decision, backed by Cricket Australia, was made because the slogans were deemed to be about the slaughter in Gaza.

In October, Khawaja retweeted a statement by UK rapper Riz Ahmed, condemning the murder of all innocents, Israeli and Palestinian. The post by Ahmed denounced the Israeli occupation, warned against the war crimes it was committing and insisted, “We need to

put ourselves in the shoes of the people of Gaza...”

Not only are those basic truths forbidden. Now even the most general statements affirming democratic and humanitarian rights are astonishingly deemed as controversial by official institutions such as the ICC.

The international cricket matches, based as they are on a complex web of relations between corporate interests and government-aligned bodies, cannot be tarnished by even the most oblique reference to the unfolding genocide.

The edict against Khawaja’s shoes was made under conditions where most of the governments in the major cricketing nations, including Britain and Australia, have explicitly and aggressively backed Israel’s bombardment, despite its plainly criminal character.

In his Wednesday social media video, Khawaja stated: “I won’t say much, I don’t need to. But what I do want is for everyone who did get offended somehow is to ask yourself these questions: Is freedom not for everyone? Are all lives not equal?”

Referencing attacks against this stand, including on social media, he said: “Let’s be honest about it, if me saying all lives are equal” had resulted in “people being offended to the point where they’re calling me up and telling me off, well isn’t that the bigger problem? These people obviously don’t believe in what I’ve written and it’s not just a handful of people you’d be shocked about how many feel this way.”

On X/Twitter, those condemning Khawaja, aside from Zionist supporters of Israel, are right-wing individuals, the types who are hostile to Aborigines, refugees and other oppressed peoples. Those forces have been given a boost by the ICC edict. Meanwhile, Khawaja has won overwhelming support from ordinary

people, along with some cricketing personalities who have acknowledged his courage.

Khawaja, who is Muslim, emphasised that he viewed all lives as being equal, regardless of race or religion.

He said: “This is close to my heart. When I see thousands of innocent children dying without any repercussions or remorse, I imagine my two girls. What if this was them? No one chooses where they’re born and then I see the world turn their backs on them. My heart can’t take it. I already feel my life wasn’t equal to others when I was growing up but luckily for me I never lived in a world where that lack of equality was life or death.”

The true toll of Israel’s bombardment is not known because many victims remain beneath the rubble, but it is estimated that more than 10,000 children in Gaza have been murdered by Israeli bombs in the past nine weeks.

Khawaja rejected the assertion that the slogans on his shoes were political statements, instead describing them as a “humanitarian appeal.” He said he would abide by the ruling but would contest it. Khawaja took to the field on Thursday wearing a black armband. He wore the same pair of shoes, but with tape over the slogans.

The incident is a pale reflection of the vast polarisation that has been revealed in the genocide. While governments and official institutions have adopted the mass murder of civilians as their policy, masses of people have taken to the streets in the largest anti-war movement in decades.

The claim that sport and politics can be separated is always a nonsense, invariably advanced by right-wing and officially-aligned political forces to prevent any oppositional sentiments from being expressed by athletes.

The connection between sport and politics, including war, is obvious in the case of cricket, played at the top-level almost exclusively by England and the former colonies where it implanted the game.

The first moves towards an international structure for the sport were presided over by Britain, in the dwindling years of its imperial and colonial preeminence. The ICC’s predecessor organisation, fittingly named the Imperial Cricket Conference, was established in 1909 and initially composed only of Britain, Australia and South Africa.

Until 1989, the chairmanship of the ICC was

automatically conferred on the president of the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), a private London club dominated by the British aristocracy. The MCC continues to oversee and determine the rules of cricket.

In its current incarnation, the ICC is something of an unholy alliance between the Commonwealth imperialist powers, such as England and Australia, and cricketing authorities in India, where the game has the largest audience and is most profitable. The cricket governing body is now headquartered in the United Arab Emirates, a country with negligible connections to the game but vast flows of cash.

The Board of Control for Cricket in India has close ties to the government of President Narendra Modi. His administration has been dubbed by some rights’ organisations as an “electoral autocracy,” given its sweeping attacks on political opponents and civil liberties.

Modi has revoked the limited autonomy of Kashmir and in 2019 subjected its millions of residents, mostly Muslim, to a shutdown of communications and martial law, reminiscent of Israeli actions against the Palestinians. More recently, Modi’s government has been accused by Canada of orchestrating the assassination of a Sikh activist on its territory.

The ICC and the administrators of cricket worldwide have facilitated Modi’s use of cricket to prettify his increasingly despotic rule.

In Australia, cricket has always been associated with the promotion of nationalism and the various myths and tropes that have been used to justify it. Governments and prime ministers have often cultivated close ties to the national teams, and it has sometimes been claimed that the second most important position in the country is that of national cricket captain.

The week before the crackdown on Khawaja for purportedly bringing politics to the game, the Prime Minister’s XI took the field against Pakistan. In that annual fixture, a team picked and named after the leader of the government plays against the team that is touring Australia for the summer.



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