



## WFC QATAR 2022: FOOTBALLERS' ACTIVISM, HUMAN RIGHTS AND REFLECTIONS ON EVENTS THAT OCCURRED DURING THE FINAL AWARD CEREMONY

Abstract - With an eye to the applicable sporting regulations and considering what has been written in two previous articles by the same author, some specific events that took place on the FIFA World Cup, hosted in Qatar from 20 November to 18 December 2022, will be examined. The efficacy and effectiveness of the rules governing the right of athletes to express themselves on the playing field and respect for the ceremonial on the podium will be discussed for the purposes of the strategic intentions of leaving a positive social legacy in the host country and for all fans. It will be concluded that controversial and even divisive attitudes continue to occur, even with good intentions and in creative forms sometimes consistent with the regulations, which can modify the effectiveness of events in promoting friendship, respect for the diversity of cultures and points of view. On the one hand, the rules protect the rightful prerogatives of event owners, relieved of responsibilities they cannot have. On the other hand, there is room for the creativity of activists, avoiding that their expectations are completely stifled and that there are unnecessary restrictions on their behavior. There is a dynamic balance which, even with conflicting opinions, has not prevented up to know to continue to gather the whole world through the unifying passion aroused by sporting events.

Keywords: WFC; Qatar 2022; sport; activism, ceremonial.

## WFC QATAR 2022: ATIVISMO DOS FUTEBOLISTAS, DIREITOS HUMANOS E REFLEXÕES SOBRE OS ACONTECIMENTOS OCORRIDOS DURANTE A PREMIAÇÃO FINAL

Resumo - De olho no regulamento esportivo aplicável e levando em conta o que foi escrito em dois artigos anteriores do mesmo autor, alguns eventos específicos que aconteceram por ocasião da Copa do Mundo da FIFA, realizada no Catar de 20 de novembro a 18 de dezembro de 2022, será examinado. A eficácia e efetividade das regras que regem a capacidade de expressão dos atletas em campo e o respeito ao cerimonial no pódio serão discutidas para efeito das intenções estratégicas de deixar um legado social positivo no país-sede e para todos os fãs. Concluir-se-á que atitudes controversas e até divisíveis continuam ocorrendo, mesmo com boas intenções e de formas criativas por vezes condizentes com os regulamentos, o que pode modificar a eficácia dos eventos na promoção da amizade, respeito à diversidade de culturas e pontos de vista. Por um lado, as regras protegem as legítimas prerrogativas dos donos de eventos, isentos de responsabilidades que não podem ter. Por outro lado, há espaço para a criatividade dos ativistas, evitando que suas expectativas sejam totalmente abafadas e que haja restrições desnecessárias ao seu comportamento. Há um equilíbrio dinâmico que, mesmo com opiniões conflitantes, não impediu até agora de continuar a reunir o mundo inteiro pela paixão unificadora despertada pelos eventos esportivos.

Palavras-chave: WFC; Catar 2022; esporte; ativismo, cerimonial.

## WFC QATAR 2022: ACTIVISMO DE LOS FUTBOLISTAS, DERECHOS HUMANOS Y REFLEXIONES SOBRE LOS HECHOS OCURRIDOS DURANTE LA PREMIACIÓN FINAL

Resumen - Con la vista puesta en la normativa deportiva aplicable y teniendo en cuenta lo escrito en dos artículos anteriores del mismo autor, algunos eventos concretos que tuvieron lugar con motivo de la Copa Mundial de la FIFA, celebrada en Qatar del 20 de noviembre al 18 de diciembre de 2022, será examinado. Se discutirá la eficacia y efectividad de las reglas que rigen la capacidad de los atletas para expresarse en el campo de juego y el respeto por el ceremonial en el podio a los efectos de las intenciones estratégicas de dejar un legado social positivo en el país anfitrión y para todos los aficionados. Se concluirá que siguen produciéndose actitudes controvertidas e incluso divisorias, incluso con buenas intenciones y en formas creativas a veces acordes con la normativa, que pueden modificar la eficacia de los eventos en la promoción de la amistad, el respeto a la diversidad de culturas y puntos de vista. Por un lado, las reglas protegen las legítimas prerrogativas de los propietarios de eventos, relevados de responsabilidades que no pueden tener. Por otro lado, se da cabida a la creatividad de los activistas, evitando que sus expectativas queden completamente sofocadas y que haya restricciones innecesarias a su comportamiento. Existe un equilibrio dinámico que, aún con opiniones encontradas, no ha impedido hasta ahora seguir reuniendo al mundo entero a través de la pasión unificadora que despiertan los eventos deportivos.

Palabras-clave: Palanca; WFC; Catar 2022; deporte; activismo, ceremonial.

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Dedicated to Gianluca,  
Ilaria, Marina, Sara,  
Somayeh



## Introduction

The purpose of this work is to present considerations about the activism of the players and the rules of the Organizing Committee, during the World Cup of FIFA, held in Qatar from 20 November to 18 December 2022. In a previous paper the same topic has been addressed in the context of the Games Olympians<sup>1</sup>. FIFA is an international federation recognized by the IOC and has the strength and autonomy to use its own rules in its own events. I will use some specific references relating to the Olympic Charter only to highlight fully shared aspects in sporting practice such as, for example, the principle of respect and non-discrimination.

Over the years, FIFA has opposed political protests and the displaying of slogans by players during matches and in stadiums. Although the regulation has not changed, forms of activism in support of the protection of human rights have been progressively tolerated, up to expressing appreciation for the athletes in their gesture of kneeling to support the Black Lives Matter movement<sup>1</sup>. The indication that the sensitivity of the opposing team and the public must be protected remains in the rules of the game<sup>2</sup>.

Also, as with all rules, the infraction cannot always be determined by the dynamics of the behavior, but the intentions of its perpetrator must be taken into consideration.

For the events examined below and related to the World Cup in Qatar, as we will see, these premises are both valid.

## To sing or not to sing the national anthem

On the FWC football match in Qatar, Iran vs England, on November 21, 2022, the players of the Iran national football team refrained from singing the national anthem. The gesture was a silent act of protest their government over the death of the young Mahsa Amini\* and in support of the resulting demonstrations by young Iranians in favor of the recognition of women's rights in their country. In the subsequent match against Wales on 25 November, following threats received from their government and directed at the families of the players, the latter decided to sing the national anthem<sup>3,4</sup>.

It can be argued that the national anthem, both for Iran's players and their government, has been a vehicle for a political and social message. There is no rule that

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\*She was an Iranian girl who appears to have been killed following the beatings received by the morality police, after her arrest for wearing the hijab incorrectly.

establishes whether the hymn should be intoned. Since the players changed their practice in protest and claimed non-sporting reasons for their unusual behavior, they made it possible for the government of Iran to take steps to override their intentions at the earliest opportunity. Paradoxically, they were forced to sing the anthem during the next match, for non-sporting reasons and without any sporting shield to protect them under the regulations. The fans in the stadium were divided between those who expected the players to show solidarity with the protesters in Iran and those who were not interested or against it. Many fans in the stands supported their players, welcoming their activism on November 21<sup>5</sup> and recognizing the need for them to bow to pressure on November 25 to protect themselves and their families from retaliation<sup>6</sup>.

In order not to cause any unjust harm to the detriment of athletes and other people, the ceremonial provides that athletes must adhere to the protocol for sporting purposes only, postponing the exercise of their freedom of expression to other moments. No protection can be guaranteed by the event organizer for conduct not regulated by the sport. Athletes can only be protected for behaviors permitted on the playing field and functional to sport: for example, the organizer of a boxing match who has the permission of the local authorities ensures that a contender cannot be tried by a non-sporting court for having dealt his opponent a punch consistent with the boxing rules. Similarly, athletes are asked to respect the regulation as it is the only umbrella capable of ensuring that the race can be played without it being an excuse for other purposes.

It could be hypothesized to regulate, through the prior communication by each national federation/NOC, the behavior that the athletes of the respective delegation will have. If this were the case, the behavior of the athletes would be the result of a decision-making process by those responsible for ensuring independence from politics and making ineffective the attempts to intrude by third parties or for non-sporting purposes. This approach should be investigated and it cannot be ruled out that it would have the same weakness as any other in dealing with creative situations. Furthermore, it could be vexatious and harm the rights of athletes unjustifiably. Further restrictions on behavior on the podium are not necessary for sporting purposes and would make participation in the ceremonial stereotyped with implications on the possibility of expressing one's personal humanity in gestures such as smiling, crying, closing one's eyes and other gestures that pertain to the emotional sphere. An excessive regulation of the behavior of

the athletes during the execution of the anthem could furthermore reinforce the intrusion of messages precisely in a circumstance which should be naiver and more spontaneous than any other.

The eligibility of athletes presented by their respective NOCs and national sports federations is not without its political aspects as the athletes represent their respective nation. As in the case of the Iran team, the instrumental use of the national anthem can itself become a form of 'sloganing' that is difficult to regulate. The possibility of participating without being part of a NOC or a national federation and without representing any country is allowed under specific conditions such as, for example, following the exclusion of an athlete's national Olympic committee<sup>7</sup>.

The fans have a very strong bond with the athletes of their nation which is rooted in the sense of territorial and cultural 'belonging' which constitutes a fundamental element of inspiration. National teams are a way to ensure the participation of athletes from all over the world even in individual sports. In team competitions, the nationality of the athletes provides a simple criterion for the composition of the teams who also receive the greatest attention and support from their respective compatriots. Connecting with states also facilitates the funding and economic livelihood of sport.

The possible removal of this criterion could be consistent with the non-political nature of sport, but it is not necessary and would be disrespectful of other rights and legitimate expectations of athletes and people from all over the world, who are honored to represent and value their cultural heritage. It cannot be excluded that the further evolution of globalization phenomena may require an overcoming of the current territorial organization of sport and a mitigation of the nationality criterion, as occurs with a growing number of athletes who change their passports for family or work reasons<sup>8</sup>. This topic can be better examined in a dedicated article.

The instrumental use of the anthem by the players and the government of Iran provides the starting point for some considerations that should be explored:

1. The choice of the athletes to respect or break a ceremonial rule (even if of a customary type) concerns their propensity to accept it intimately, not to suffer it as a further imposition in exchange for the right to participate, to recognize its necessity for the protection of valid / non-overriding prerogatives of other stakeholders<sup>1</sup>. Other times the deepest desire of the athletes to venture into even

more difficult and painful paths prevails, rather than taking refuge in inaction and in the easier and safer path<sup>†9</sup> by testing (bypassing them) the very criteria of punishability in their comparisons;

2. The opportunity to have national representations is both an inspirational factor and a criticality of sporting events as it maintains a link with the political organization of the athletes' countries through the respective flag, anthem and symbols<sup>1</sup>;
3. It is stupid to claim to codify with a rule all the possible creative solutions aimed at circumventing it<sup>1,10</sup>.

The perspective exposed up to now is that of the owner of the event and concerns the reason why he has introduced a rule, which corresponds to his own protection and the possibility of organizing non-divisive events. Later I will try to examine what happened from the point of view of the Iranian players, trying to compose as large a picture as possible and incorporating some reflections made by Iranian friends with whom I interacted.

The attitude of Iranian players is not entirely new. Sohn Kee Chungè, an athlete of Korean origin, participated and won the marathon at the 1936 Berlin Olympics under the flag of Japan but wished he hadn't represented a nation that had annexed his own. But the case of Iran does not coincide with the one just described. The peculiarity is given by the fact that both the athletes and their fans have shown that they have lost their attachment to their nation to the point of not wanting to give it prestige through their sporting results. The assassination of Mahsa Amini by the Morale Police was a breaking point with the past for a large part of the Iranian population. There has been a profound separation between participation in the state understood as its institutions and the solidarity of the population understood as a cultural and social value. The players themselves have continued to love their fans but no longer the institutions in which they do not recognize themselves. It can be said that the silent protest was the demonstration of their humanity: the broken hearts of the players put them in the paradoxical condition of playing a football match but at the same time not wanting to celebrate the anthem and the symbols in any way of their country to escape any form of recognition and homage to

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<sup>†</sup>“It would be much easier, the path of least resistance, to stay quiet, not speak up; but doing something just because it's easier is not really my thing (w/p)”<sup>9</sup>

the tyranny of their rulers. Anyone who has read and shares this approach thus far might follow me on to argue that singing the anthem would be the only real form of political message that players have attempted to evade. Paradoxically, on November 21st they complied with the rules and did not bring any political message to the playing field while they broke them on November 25th when, under pressure from their rulers, they sang the anthem of Iran.

In conclusion, one of the purposes of preventing the use of the pitch and the podium for non-sporting reasons is to protect the athletes themselves from external pressure<sup>1</sup>; this requires the cooperation of the athletes who are the ones who are required to respect the sporting rules, including those of the ceremonial. But in the case examined, the shield for athletes did not work. The challenge is to ensure the effective independence of athletes from political power, preserve the autonomy and impartiality of sports authorities and protect the ability of athletes to participate in international competitions. Win-win-win solutions that have not been found even in the case of Russian and Belarusian athletes who have been banned as an indirect effect of the decisions of the respective governments<sup>7</sup>.

### **Protection of human rights in the country hosting the event**

The assignment of the football tournament to Qatar was controversial due to issues related to the suspicion of corruption of the FIFA jurors<sup>11</sup> but also for reasons of human rights and environmental sustainability. Although the reports of the organizing committee indicate that the World Cup in Qatar is sustainable<sup>12</sup>, there are strong doubts considering the climatic conditions and the huge use of resources for the construction of 8 stadiums<sup>13,14</sup>.

Just a few days before the inauguration ceremony, reports of the failure to recognize fundamental human rights in Qatar multiplied and numerous fatal accidents were reported in the construction of stadiums<sup>15</sup>. These accusations were rejected by the organizing committee which did not deny the deaths but attributed them to factors not dependent on the safety of construction sites or the exploitation of workers and “[...] mortality statistics are in line with international best practice and set new standards for the region (w/p)”<sup>16</sup>. The other infractions concern individual freedom, such as that of marriage and divorce, education, sexual orientation<sup>17</sup>. According to many journalists,

FIFA is responsible for not keeping its promise to adopt adequate measures to protect workers and promote human rights, ignoring reports of discrimination against women and the LGBT community<sup>15</sup>.

The fact check of the truthfulness of the data on deaths at work is not within the possibilities of the writer of this article. Especially since there are many conflicting analyses. Those who have tried to reconstruct the facts have concluded that there are not sufficient and reliable sources<sup>18</sup>. The document drawn up by the International Labor Organization<sup>19</sup> certifies the growing awareness of occupational safety and the management of accident data in Qatar. Studies on cardiac events on Nepalese workers employed in Qatar also show a decrease in accident cases in the years 2015-2017 compared to the years 2009-2014<sup>20</sup>. This circumstance is attributed, among other things, precisely to the greater attention aroused by the media<sup>20</sup> which has raised awareness of a reduction in the exposure of workers to excessive temperatures and dehydration.

Conditions of slavery induced using the practice of kafala<sup>‡</sup>, discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, wealth and origin have also been reported. A reflection on the recent history of this country requires verifying the effective responsibilities of the birth and historical conservation of abuses and considering the development of the legislative change processes underway. Qatar has only been independent from the United Kingdom since 1971 and has promulgated laws for the safety of workers in accordance with the international labor organization. The effects of political, economic and social transformations may become concrete over time<sup>21</sup>.

Compared to the protocols deliberately signed by FIFA, the possibility that the organization of football events is responsible for injustices, discrimination and fatal accidents appears to be a crucial point. Since the offer from Qatar, it was evident that the organization of the FWC would have involved enormous infrastructural interventions, with the use of many workers, investments, tourist flows and environmental implications. This specific situation has determined the need for a strategic justification by FIFA which, jointly with the IOC, has declared its objective to promote respect for human rights and to leave a positive legacy for Qatar<sup>22,23</sup>. According to a generalist approach, the global media exposure associated with mega events could contribute to the resolution of the

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<sup>‡</sup>It is a system regulated by law for which the foreign worker must have a local tutor, who is the employer. This legislative instrument easily turns into a bond of slavery for the worker who, if she/he loses her/his tutor, would not be entitled to a residence visa.

social problems of the host country. However, scholars have found no evidence that following the staging of mega events in places of the world where there are human rights violations, real improvements in the social sphere have occurred because of the sporting event. This undermines the credibility of the statements of the owners of the event<sup>24</sup>. There is a lack of evidence that the processes are even accelerated by the event and that therefore they can be considered its legacy<sup>25,26</sup>.

The possibility of having a positive medium-term legacy on the quality of life of the host community requires the launch of structured initiatives and the legacy must be understood as the result of an intentional action and not an effect that maybe occur<sup>27</sup>. There is not even an agreement or any customary norm that establishes how to balance peace and justice, establishing the limit in pursuing actions that, even in good intentions, can generate suffering on fragile people<sup>28</sup>. Finally, customary international law and international agreements, promoting the protection and respect of religious beliefs and practices<sup>29</sup>, have not produced shared and binding rules on issues related to these areas.

The implementation of FIFA's strategy relating to the protection of human rights and labor rights has been based on tripartite responsibility between FIFA, Qatar's Supreme Council (SC), and the Local Organizing Committee (Q22)<sup>30</sup>. Regarding this strategy, some scholars state

Due to insufficient accountability mechanisms, the tripartite network demonstrates difficulties in determining those steering and responsible. This bodes ill for the capacity of the governance form to deliver the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 at the level of the UNGPs<sup>§</sup> standard (p. 10)<sup>31</sup>.

Multiple reports concerning the lack of respect for human rights in Qatar, as well as the weakness of the actions that can lead to a significant change in society through major events, the modest effectiveness attributed to the strategy by FIFA, lead us to suspect that the staging of FWC 22 must be followed by further internal local government initiatives and intentional actions by the international community to mitigate and resolve social injustices. The owners of sporting events will continue to have limited effectiveness in solving such far-reaching problems. Already in 2021, the president of the

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<sup>§</sup>UNGPs: United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights

IOC Bach himself said: “We cannot solve human rights issues which generations of politicians were unable to solve (w/p)”<sup>32</sup>.

The lack of evidence that the promises of social improvement through the staging of sporting events can be kept suggests that it is necessary to verify the real conditions of the country right from the presentation of the bid.

### **A hand to cover the mouth**

Before the match against the Japan team on November 23, 2022, the players of the Germany national team placed a hand in front of their mouth in protest. FIFA had expressly forbidden the use of an armband other than that envisaged for the team captain<sup>33</sup> and specifically the one bearing the rainbow colors of the LGBTQ+ community and the words ‘one love’. FIFA’s clarification was necessary to protect the sensitivity of the public and the local population, as established by the regulation. The gesture of the players was a sign of their impatience with the limitation of their freedom of expression. Media reaction from many Western nations was positive towards the gesture. German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser, who was among the spectators at the match alongside FIFA President Gianni Infantino and wearing the banned armband, said before the World Cup: “In today’s times it is incomprehensible that FIFA does not want people to openly stand for tolerance and against discrimination. It does not fit in our times, and it is not appropriate towards people (w/p)”<sup>34</sup>.

Different points of view have emerged on social media and in the newspapers of non-Western countries. At the end of this article, many of the response tweets to the German team’s official post are reported through the relevant twitter account. The tweets simply want to exemplify the variability, without entering matters of judgement. The texts are reproduced in their entirety without changing any of the forms of writing and expression typical of social media, including abbreviations and any typos.

As anticipated in the introduction, it is necessary to consider the declination of the fundamental principles of Olympism, which, as stated in the Olympic Charter, must be accepted by all the International Sports Federations.

The Fundamental Principle no. 7 (FP7) of the Olympic Charter states

The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Olympic Charter shall be secured without discrimination of any kind, such as

race, colour, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status (p. 8)<sup>35</sup>

This rule extends to NOCs, international federations, national federations and is therefore mandatory for the Football Association, QFA, and for FIFA itself. Compliance with the FP7 can be desired but cannot instead be imposed on Sovereign Countries that answer for their actions to the political, cultural or economic organizations of which they belong both at a regional and global level such as the EC, AU, ASEAN, GCC, OPEC, OIC, LAS, WTO, SICA, FEALAC, CARICOM<sup>\*\*</sup>, and the United Nations. The possibility that the QFA has recognition by FIFA depends on its organization and operational choices consistent with the Olympic Charter, including independence from political conditioning<sup>35</sup>. The assessment of the sovereign state is not the responsibility of sports bodies and could represent an unjust impediment to athletes with respect to enjoying the right to sport<sup>35</sup> and therefore also to participate in sporting events. The decision to exclude Russian and Belarusian athletes from competitions after the start of the war in Ukraine is justified for reasons of safety and integrity of the competitions<sup>7</sup>.

FIFA, as stated in its strategic documents, in the absence of international standards with which it is required to comply, has voluntarily undertaken to play a proactive role in the protection of human rights in the countries where sporting events are hosted. Complaints from players on a team, directed at the host nation or FIFA, can introduce conflict. FIFA has entered into an agreement with Qatar to hold an event subject to sporting regulations and respectful of local laws and local sentiments. He therefore has the right to protect the event and temporarily limit the faculties of the athletes. The rule complies with international law as already supported with reference to rule 50 of the Olympic charter<sup>1</sup>. Any behavior by athletes that deviates from the regulations can invalidate the effectiveness of the strategy of Olympism and International Federations to promote fundamental human principles through the soft action of sport within the host

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<sup>\*\*</sup>EC, AU, ASEAN, GCC, OPEC, OIC, LAS, WTO, SICA, FEALAC, CARICOM: European Community, African Union, Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Gulf Cooperation Council, Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, Organization of the Islamic Conference, League of Arab States, World Trade Organisation, Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana, Forum for East Asia-Latin America Cooperation, Caribbean Community and Common Market.

country's society, an objective which requires certain restrictions on athletes and the intervention of a third-party arbitration in case of infringement<sup>35</sup>.

Activists aim to attract the attention of policy makers to look for effective solutions to the problems they care about and do not expect to have any permission to act. For this they are willing to break or circumvent the rules in a creative way<sup>1</sup>.

The contracts for the supply of energy resources, the availability of NATO military bases located in Qatar, the rich financing enjoyed by many football clubs in Europe from entrepreneurs and financial and oil companies in Qatar are in the public domain<sup>36,37,38</sup>. Germany's players have adopted an activism strategy that challenges the regulation and is not content to wear the official FIFA armband that reads "No discrimination". With their gesture they reached the fans regardless of their idea, whether the fans were only interested in enjoying the sporting event or they could be disappointed and disturbed by receiving lessons from people who are there to play<sup>1</sup>. Any collateral damage, such as the possible disturbance to public order as well as the dubious effectiveness of the gesture which were followed by the criticisms of the opponents, are elements that testify to the opportunity that the strategies should be synergistic to have the maximum effect. The German minister's armband instead of the one admitted by FIFA demonstrates that a German political decision-maker agrees with the principles underlying human rights claims, but intentions do not replace the actions necessary to initiate processes of dialogue and change in shared forms. Activism should not replace anything that remains undone and, according to FIFA's logic, should be channeled towards approaches that are widely shared and accepted by the main international agencies<sup>39</sup>.

Attempts by players to circumvent rules may be due to FIFA's insufficient communication of the reasons of its strategy. Furthermore, the national federations themselves and the NOCs can resort to different approaches in specific regional and local contexts<sup>1</sup>. Another explanation, consistent with the words of the minister, is the non-sharing of the principles on which the sporting rules are based. As a political authority, the minister has not followed the rules of diplomacy, becoming the protagonist of a form of activism that does not relieve her of responsibility for the role she plays, and which highlights the failure of politics the failure of politics to fulfill its duties. Furthermore, with her statements, she didn't care about the line between politics and sport. Referring

to FIFA, Ms. Nancy Faeser made statements that value as her opinion while, as a political authority, she seems to shirk her responsibilities.

From the point of view of international law, she has directed her statements, whether they are supported by solid reasons, against an organization hierarchically outside its scope of action. He should have turned, as a minister, to the authorities of his own government. The latter may possibly promote the relevant issues in the appropriate international forums. Headquarters in which FIFA had already acted, agreeing armbands for the team captains.

Whatever the process to be followed to resolve the issues, it can be argued that the behavior of the German minister is evidence of the scarce effectiveness of the sporting rule. The law, in fact, is perceived as inadequate for achieving the objective for which it was promulgated and for this reason it is often disregarded (becomes ineffective) in the belief that one has the right to evade it by expressing one's thoughts when one believes to be in the 'right', in a self-referential perspective to protect one's cultural education<sup>40</sup>. The German minister contested the sporting rules and did not respect those of the sovereign state in which he was a guest, which concern two distinct areas. Due to the two areas, the authors of many tweets criticize the behavior of the German minister differently than that of the players from Germany. For example, they write:

One of the wonders of this World Cup is to see an interior minister responsible for enforcing the laws in her country breaking the law of another country with premeditation, [...] Maybe if you had spent more time training and less time coming up with imperialistic hollow virtue-signaling gestures you wouldn't have lost the game (w/p)<sup>††</sup>.

No sporting authority has commented on the two events: the minister's armband does not constitute a fact that pertains to sport and the attitude of the German players does not clearly infringe any sporting regulation. It is likely that the actions of FIFA and the IOC will remain focused on the regulation, on the review of the actions that can be carried out effectively for the promotion of the spirit of the game and initiatives to support respect for human rights around the world. However, the position of neutrality and extraneousness to political issues was softened on messages directed to specific non-sporting issues, such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict<sup>7</sup>. The rules could be further revised

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<sup>††</sup>See Appendix at the end of this writing.

for greater effectiveness and credibility of the ambition to promote a more just world without discrimination through sport.

The criterion of non-interference with the legal and social order and the protection, through sporting regulations, of the laws and sensitivity of the population of the Host Country<sup>35</sup>, can become a pretext for accepting offers from authoritarian governments and which they implement discrimination and restrictions on the freedom of their citizens, by using forms of prohibition on expressing their dissent. Based on beliefs justified on religious and social grounds, the Qatari government rejects the slogan “one love” and the rights that have been recognized to the LGBTQ+ community in other countries. In Qatar, it is a crime to wear the LGBTQ+ community headband. As contrary to the law, the band constitutes an offense to the social and legal organization of the local population. FIFA has previously agreed with the local government and with the main global agencies that deal with the protection of human rights the only media campaign that includes, among others, the captain's armbands with the wording ‘No discrimination’, without other references<sup>39</sup>.

As already noted, the lack of evidence of improving the social conditions of disadvantaged people through the staging of mega sporting events in authoritarian countries adds discredit to the event owners. This discredit can also be leveraged by the citizens of countries where people can orient the government's choices in a democratic way. They can prevent their governs from hosting dysfunctional mega events for the local community. This increases the difficulty of the bidding processes and reduces the margins of choice of the event owners<sup>24</sup>.

Despite the uncertainty that this situation causes, the current choices of international sports bodies have so far proved to be effective both in avoiding being overwhelmed by non-sporting issues and in keeping discussions alive beyond their responsibility. The regulation, while imposing limitations on athletes, has balanced their needs by leaving room for creativity and tolerating different level of initiatives in different contexts as happened in regional competitions.

Athletes have options that match their personal aura and their communicative effectiveness to reach their fans and be impactful on social and political causes. Their behavior, independent but respectful of sporting rules and institutions, can achieve significant results and inspire millions of people up to influencing governments decisions.

In the proximity of his death, it is natural to mention the case of Pele who has gone through the history of Brazil in troubled years of the civil-military dictatorship. Thanks to his effective stance of neutrality and dedication to cultivating his soccer-playing ability, which he himself recognized as a gift for bringing joy to people, Pele united all fans into one chorus (although it should be remembered that he certainly kept his distance from those who were more politicized). The truce in the Nigerian civil war that was called when he played a soccer match there with his team is emblematic<sup>41</sup>.

### **What happens on the FWC podium?**

On the occasion of the awarding of the world cup to Argentina, two particular situations occurred: (i) the gesture of goalkeeper Ramirez who, in the act of receiving the 'Golden Glove' award as the best goalkeeper of the tournament, put it close to his groin; (ii) the donning of the Argentina captain, Messi, with the 'bisht' by the Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, immediately before handing him the cup<sup>42</sup>.

The first gesture was almost unanimously considered obscene and inappropriate especially as the player later reported that his behavior was intentionally directed at the French fans as a revenge for their attitude towards him. Ramirez himself later became the protagonist of another episode: a few days later, while he was celebrating in front of the crowd gathered to welcome the team in the streets of Buenos Aires, he showed a puppet in the shape of the French player Mbappè. The French sports minister, Oudea-Castera, commented with these words: "I find it pitiful. It's just vulgar, inappropriate, really not up to the occasion. This Emiliano Martinez is not distinguishing himself. It is rather pathetic (w/p)"<sup>43</sup>.

The second episode concerns the bisht, a traditional dress of royal families and Arab warriors used after a victory or on special occasions such as weddings. It is unprecedented that the captain of the winning team was presented with the trophy by the FIFA president after being dressed by a local authority in local dress. Pele was seen wearing a sombrero after winning the 1970 World Cup in Mexico<sup>44</sup>. But the 1970 event did not occur on the podium and it may have been Pele himself who wore the sombrero. The photo of Messi lifting the trophy wearing the bisht also appeared on the FIFA website<sup>45</sup>. That moment was commented on social media and in newspapers in many countries in ways attributable to two extremely polarized positions both in terms of

content and the geographical and cultural distribution of those who support them. I try to roughly summarize as follows:

1. Messi's dressing is an attempt of intrusiveness by the organizing committee on the celebration of the winning team and on the football event and is therefore inappropriate; precisely because inopportune had never occurred before; Messi's behavior could also be a way to please a major football sponsor related also to the club he plays for; supporters of this position believe that there should have been no other gesture than the delivery of the trophy into the hands of Messi, as required by the regulation;
2. the bisht enhances the local culture; criticizing the gesture of having honored the winner with the delivery of the bisht means assuming an Islamophobic and intolerant and closed position on the part of Western culture, which exemplifies the failure to respect the rules of cordiality and hospitality; Messi's attitude is that of a respectful 'guest' and his photo is iconic and seals a perfectly organized World Cup in Qatar.

No official comments from FIFA are currently available for both Ramirez's attitude and Messi's dressing. The media impact of everything that happens on the FWC podium is evident, considering the high number of spectators present at the stadium and those connected with all available digital technologies. While awaiting the estimate relating to the world final in Qatar, it is sufficient to recall here that according to FIFA data from 2018 "[...] the final was seen live by a combined 1.12 billion viewers worldwide (w.p)"<sup>46</sup>. For this reason, whatever happens on the podium should consider any possible implications. The purpose of maintaining a formal framework free of creative elements not envisaged by the protocol is to avoid potentially divisive acts capable of distracting from the sporting celebration and fair play. The attitude of the leaders and presiding officers at the awards ceremony should also set the example to arouse positive feelings and emotions shared by all the audience.

It has never been established in which ways the trophy should be displayed by the winner and with which part of the body it should be touched. But Ramirez's subsequent statement leaves no room for interpretation of his gesture, which he himself declared to be provocative and therefore to be considered hostile / disrespectful.

The 'Kit and team equipment' standard, contained in the document 'FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022' establishes that the clothing must be approved by FIFA and article 27 of the 'Equipment Regulation' must be respected

In FIFA Final Competitions, Celebratory Attire may only be worn on the field of play after the following official FIFA activities have taken place (during which the Team must wear the Shirts they wore during the Match in question): 27.2.1 the trophy presentation; 27.2.2 official FIFA photographs. 27.2.3 official media appearances (p. 35)<sup>48</sup>.

Even if the shirt had been submitted for approval by FIFA, following a formal request from the Argentina team, this garment would have had to be part of the game kit in the final to be dressed on the podium! It can be argued that it could not have been used on the podium without the Argentina team committing an infraction. Any sanctions appear unlikely as Messi himself could argue that he had no power to escape the dressing that took place in front of the smiling eyes of the FIFA president and on the initiative of the president of the organizing committee. It would be up to President Infantino and Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani to justify the creative variation of the protocol that they themselves implemented and allowed at the last moment and which is premeditated (the dress was not there by chance!). All this happened in front of the eyes of over 1 billion viewers!

### **Conclusions and future prospects**

The media relevance of mega-events determines the practical impossibility of keeping issues that transversally concern all of humanity compartmentalized regardless of the reason for which it is called together by the owners of the events. In the case of sporting events, a precarious balance continues to emerge between the need, through them, to achieve objectives in the social sphere that have not been resolved by generations of politicians, with that of finding an opportunity to unite all peoples while respecting their differences. Events can provide a great stage to convey messages regardless of the intentions of the organizers. They try to maintain the conditions to prevent events from being an occasion for conflict that they cannot handle.

The participation of athletes representing their countries is an opportunity to celebrate cultural differences. On the other hand, it can become the pretext for transferring non-sporting conflicts to the field.

The balance that the rules imposed by event owners must ensure to defend their legitimate prerogatives is dynamic and does not escape criticism from those who perceive the limitations as an impediment to the enjoyment of rights assumed as non-negotiable and which cannot be postponed.

In the cases examined (except for Messi's dressing), the vagueness of the regulation permits that no obvious infringements have occurred. The true intentions of the athletes, which they themselves generally declare afterwards, help to complete the evaluation framework of their attitude.

The boards and leaders of the national, international federations and the IOC are responsible for maintaining irreproachable behaviors, for dealing with the difficult evolution of the rules of behavior according to cultural approaches and the different contexts in which sporting events are staged, both limiting and leaving one room for maneuver that the creativity of activists continues to use.

## Appendix

The intent is to collect the diversity of comments, without providing a judgment of merit. The texts are reproduced in their entirety, without typographical changes. Unfortunately, many posts that are thought to be relevant and interesting have often been retracted/deleted.

Below are some comments written on twitter<sup>\*\*</sup> after the publication of the tweet by the German team with the inscription:

“Armband or no armband, we stand by our position”.  
[https://twitter.com/DFB\\_Team\\_EN/status/1595405792957562880?s=20](https://twitter.com/DFB_Team_EN/status/1595405792957562880?s=20)

“For me it isn't standing by a position. To stand by a position you should be willing to sacrifice for that position. If they feel strong about it they shouldn't be there. Going there,

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<sup>\*\*</sup>Twitter is a social network and the word ‘*tweets*’ refers to messages posted by users.

playing, getting money & fame then saying we were not allowed to voice an opinion is hypocrisy.” <https://twitter.com/essamserry/status/1595913835508076546?s=20>

“The text book definition of hypocrisy, disrespectful and double standard that being a practice in the western world. Remember, world doesn't revolve around you. Pick yourself up, go home. Respect other people cultural and religion.” [https://twitter.com/mhanis\\_asyraf/status/1595990127800594432?s=20](https://twitter.com/mhanis_asyraf/status/1595990127800594432?s=20)

“Football is not an arena to display your political or other views. Football, a sport, is for entertainment. Can't understand why you want to mix both. Anyways hope the result of the match would prompt you to concentrate more on your game rather than other issues.” <https://twitter.com/SujithPhilip4/status/1596022221301985280?s=20>

“You are in a Muslim country, homosexuality is considered forbidden, so respect this thing, and if you do not want to respect our decisions, do not come to Qatar without force. Sit in countries and carry the flag of homosexuals there, not in Muslim countries” <https://twitter.com/Malak377552351/status/1595956243868549121?s=20>

“Well Western world is the last one to lecture about human rights..its utterly disrespectful to the hosting country and the whole region. Keep ur ideology at your home.dont impose your values on the rest of the world. This is a football game. Viva #qatar”. [https://twitter.com/HebaHadad\\_1/status/1596005124652015619?s=20](https://twitter.com/HebaHadad_1/status/1596005124652015619?s=20)

“Europeans are not used to been told what to do. So this would be a new reality for them all. I'm glad Qatar is taking a strong stand on this and that shows how strong and great they are”. <https://twitter.com/JamesWe49879491/status/1596034908161732609?s=20>

“The West have no right to impose their despicable culture on the entire world. If you couldn't respect the culture of the people hosting the World Cup, then you should have

boycotted it, and stayed home, as a sign of your solidarity with LGBTQ”.  
<https://twitter.com/Benstinoc/status/1596043921246900225?s=20>

“They talk about human rights when they massacred the whole world. Germany’s history is known for wars and assassinations 🙄🙄🙄🙄🙄🙄”  
<https://twitter.com/ffhgrhhvccf/status/1595850634632507394?s=20>

“Hats off to #Germany for their defiance against the authoritarian #FIFA and a corrupt country who treads on human rights-Qatar and #FIFA have ruined The Beautiful Game for football fans but #Germany will be remembered for generations to come for what they did  
RESPECT! #LGBTQIA”  
<https://twitter.com/DaCostaCardiac/status/1596067080079831040?s=20>

“Why didn’t you make the same thing in Russia in 2018, why didn’t you talk about human rights in Palastine being violated every day from Israeli soldiers? 🙄🙄”  
<https://twitter.com/ffhgrhhvccf/status/1595850634632507394?s=20>

“Maybe if you had spent more time training and less time coming up with imperialistic hollow virtue-signalling gestures you wouldn’t have lost the game. 🙄”  
<https://twitter.com/ArsenalReport/status/1595438640569753606?s=20>

“You are not in position to teach us about human rights where is your principles when your government begged the natural gas from Qatar and Saudi Arabia”  
[https://twitter.com/alix\\_azzawi/status/1595465050940121090?s=20](https://twitter.com/alix_azzawi/status/1595465050940121090?s=20)

“Adidas: stop wage theft & Union Busting”  
<https://twitter.com/remakeourworld/status/1656796000080764929?s=20>

“Taking a knee for racism” doesn’t make you a hero in my book, it identifies you as a performative fraud. This won’t do anything for racism, nor is it even about “racism”🙄  
It’s about Harry’s ego. And this gross fake world where these displays earn social clout.

It's narcissism.”

[https://twitter.com/Theo\\_TJ\\_Jordan/status/1595531073248759808?s=20](https://twitter.com/Theo_TJ_Jordan/status/1595531073248759808?s=20)

“Poke at the fake stuff. Make it all collapse.”

[https://twitter.com/Theo\\_TJ\\_Jordan/status/1595765413513756675?s=20](https://twitter.com/Theo_TJ_Jordan/status/1595765413513756675?s=20)

“Well done to the German National Team, you are 100% denying the right to life based on race, creed, sexuality and many other reasons is not a political statement I only wish the English team thought outside the box and came up with something like this”

<https://twitter.com/FilthyDanimal13/status/1595419373191168000?s=20>

“Remember when Mesut Ozil denounced the injustice taking place with the Uyghur Muslims and defended their rights, who are human beings like you and have rights!!! What did you do after that as European federations? A media war on the player and the destruction of his career” [https://twitter.com/\\_d97s\\_/status/1595419753765535744?s=20](https://twitter.com/_d97s_/status/1595419753765535744?s=20)

“When Mesut ÖZIL talked about childs and people who are getting killed and abused his career has ended and it wasn't about human rights ain't it? Oh yeah when it's about lgbtq is human rights but when it comes to muslims it's politics! Same as Ukrainian and Palestine.” <https://twitter.com/AbeerReffad/status/1595477751871553536?s=20>

“You must respect the religion and culture of the country organizing the World Cup and exercise your freedom in your country, but not here. But what about Mesut Ozil?” <https://twitter.com/zaid737/status/1595479391051579392?s=20>

“When Mesut Ozil spoke about the extermination of Muslims in the Uyghurs, he was persecuted by you and by all the countries of Europe,Where was your claimed human rights then ? human rights are non-negotiable ❌ western countries HYPOCRISY are non-negotiable ✅” [https://twitter.com/R\\_GR60/status/1595426777421303808?s=20](https://twitter.com/R_GR60/status/1595426777421303808?s=20)

“This is football. I hope you understand this. If you are really defending humanity and rights. There are many countries that are oppressed in wars, such as Iraq, Pakistan and

Syria. Look how many people die every day. Where is your voice? Is perversion and filth more important?" <https://twitter.com/m444gdd/status/1595612442041761793?s=20>

"One of the wonders of this World Cup is to see an interior minister responsible for enforcing the laws in her country breaking the law of another country with premeditation!" <https://twitter.com/Whitesbbs/status/1595637050446942209?s=20>

"Media reported that 20 individuals were arrested in Berlin this past weekend. Activists allege that the number was over 170. The reason? Showing public displays of support for Palestine during a "pre-emptive" ban on all commemorations of the Nakba, or Cathastrophe."<sup>49</sup>

"We all agree that human rights are non-negotiable! So what about the ppl you killed in WWI and WWII? They were human too!" <https://twitter.com/BoukeBrahim/status/1595461824186556417?s=20>

"The last people to talk about human rights are Germany! You killed 70 million during the wars, you burned out the Jews! Don't tell me that they were Nazis. Where did Nazis come from? From Mars? No, from Germany. We know they are racist, discriminatory, and brutal." <https://twitter.com/essamlutfi1234/status/1595460517845684224?s=20>

"Eight of Germany's 16 states contain restrictions on wearing the hijab by female teachers: first Baden-Württemberg, then Bavaria, Hesse, Lower Saxony, the Saarland, Bremen, North Rhine-Westphalia and Berlin. Hypocrisy much Germany!?" <https://twitter.com/moefara/status/1595645315171893250?s=20>

"In Islamic countries, this is something that is forbidden and is not permissible. It angers God. Yes, your voice is forbidden in our country. Our religion must be respected as we respect yours. What does homosexuality mean and what are its consequences for society?"<sup>50</sup>.

Many other posts feature photos of Nazi Germany, concentration camps, Hitler and images of the modern history of Germany and other European countries, with which they

want to emphasize the brutality and lack of respect for human rights in the very recent past. One image is particularly telling and combines the Nazi salute of the football team in the last century, wearing the swastika armband, with the 2022 national team with the hands over their mouth and the 'one love' armband. The author wonders if the German team can really teach about human rights<sup>51-55</sup>.

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