

RSIS Policy Brief

A Decade of Defiance and Dissent: A Wake-up Call for Sports



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Synopsis

The wave of popular defiance and demonstrations across the Middle East and North Africa parallels widespread protest across the globe from Latin America to Asia against sports organisations' mismanagement and mega-events. It is driven by lack of confidence in institutions that have failed to root out corruption and meet demands for justice, dignity and inclusiveness. Huge expenditure on sports mega events like the 2014 World Cup in Brazil are catalysts and platforms for protest in which soccer fans often play key roles. As a result, sports associations like governments should embrace the change that protestors demand or risk being swept away by an irresistible tide.

The year 2011 was marked by a wave of defiance that dispatched experts' credibility to the garbage heap of history. Common wisdom held that Arabs were too wealthy and afraid of their autocrats to actively demand change; Russians were apathetic and had a soft spot for the concept of a neo-czar; India's middle class was politically too disengaged; West Europeans were too old; Americans were oblivious to differences of class and Chinese party apparatchiks too effective at repressing dissent.

The Arabs in 2011; the Americans, Russians, Europeans, Indians and Chileans in 2012; and the Egyptians, Turks, Brazilians and Indonesians in 2013 proved the experts wrong. They heralded what promises to be a decade of defiance, dissent and popular demand for change; in which people are willing and able to assert their deep discontent in new and powerful ways.

Global sports governance is not immune to the wave of protests witness Brazil's demonstrations against the 2014 World Cup, this year's protests during Bahrain's F1 and the key role that militant soccer fans played in the overthrow in 2011 of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and the recent rejection of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's majoritarian governance as well protests over the politics underlying the country's soccer match-fixing scandal. If anything, the problems of global sports governance mirror issues underlying the more general wave of protests.

What has sparked protest ranges from public transportation costs and the fate of iconic trees to lack of economic opportunity and the choking grip of autocrats. Yet, underlying the wave of protests are common factors that concern not only political leaders and economic elites but also global sports managers. Among them:

- ◇ A lack of confidence in existing institutions;
- ◇ a perception of political, economic and social (sports) leadership that fails to listen and are not held to account for wrong decisions, misguided policies and improper or mis-management;
- ◇ failure to root out corruption at all levels of political, economic and social leadership;
- ◇ a perception that economic progress has failed to ensure that infrastructure as well as health and

education facilities do not trail the lifting of huge numbers out of poverty; and

- ◇ a demand for social justice, dignity and inclusiveness.

"FIFA Rules Nations"

The fact that virtually all protests and popular revolts are urban middle class in nature and claim a stake in shaping their urban environment and cultural identity has far-reaching consequences for sports managers and regional and global sports associations and the staging of mega events. The references of various Brazilian protesters to the 2014 World Cup should constitute a wake-up call, such as:

- ◇ "The World Cup perpetuates our urban crisis. We have become disenfranchised consumers."
- ◇ "We live in cities that operate on profit in which residents are not consulted. People are fed up with not having a say."
- ◇ "The real president of our country is FIFA. FIFA comes to our country, sets up a state within a state, and leaves."

Lack of confidence in institutions is reinforced by the frequent initial knee-jerk deployment of police and security forces to control if not quell protest in which sports fans and particularly soccer fans are often in the forefront. The use of indiscriminate police force swells protests that frequently are initially focused on a specific issue. It lifts the lid on far broader, deeply felt, pent-up anger and frustration and as demonstrated in the case of Brazil and Turkey makes it difficult to put the lid back on. Sports associations like FIFA perceived as an elitist, closed old boy network, that fails to tackle issues of corruption and mismanagement, enforce its governance rules and maintain independence from political authority, invariably become institutions whose credibility is questioned.

In addition, the emergence of mega events like the World Cup and the Olympic Games as platforms for campaigns for all kinds of rights—human, labour, gender, national, ethnic and religious—increasingly empowers activists, puts regional and international sports associations in the front line and puts the associations as well as nations at risk of reputational

damage. This year's Formula One public relations disaster in Bahrain, trade union pressure on Qatar, controversy over Israel's hosting of the FIFA Under-21 finals, last year's successful International Olympic Committee (IOC) campaign that forced three reluctant Muslim nations for the first time to field women athletes at a global sporting event and the recent election of a Bahraini soccer executive as president of the troubled Asian Football Confederation prove the point.

The responses of Qatar, Bahrain, Israel and Saudi Arabia have failed to gain them the upper hand in popular perception and coverage in the media; both of which are dominated by activists highlighting their failure to adhere to international standards of human, labour and/or gender rights. Worse, hosting mega events and nominating officials for regional and international office, has reinforced the negative perceptions they were trying to dispel. Their failure has strengthened calls for such rights to become key criteria in the awarding of future mega-events. It has also rendered the separation of sports and politics a fiction and focused attention on the need to develop systems that acknowledge the relationship but eliminate conflict of interest to ensure that it is not abused for partisan political interests on an individual, national, regional and international scale.

Sports Governance: A Sound Policy Prescription

If reputational damage and failure to achieve a key goal is a host nation's primary risk, activists may see such failure as a moral victory. Similarly, they are likely to claim any progress such as an improvement of workers' material, labour and living condition as a success even if they are unable to meet their ultimate goal. The message for host countries and sports associations is: mega events constitute a platform for showcasing both a country's progress as well as its warts. The question potential hosts have to ask themselves is what price are they willing to pay in terms of reputational risk if they are not willing or able to address their vulnerabilities. That question is all the more acute as international sports bodies like FIFA are under pressure to make human, labour and women's rights part of the criteria for awarding events. In doing so, they are likely to raise the barrier for a country's chance of gaining the opportunity to host a major event.

Proactive regional and international sports associations would do well to have their ear close to the ground to understand a swelling global trend that defines legitimacy, social justice and dignity as greater inclusivity, transparency and accountability. Understanding this trend and its consequences as it spills into the streets of the world's capitals and major urban centres involves a paradigm shift in sports management, including:

- ◇ A recognition that sports and politics are inextricably intertwined. Denial of this fact of life undermines credibility and flies in the face of reality. That reality is evident at every twist of the road from the direct involvement of rulers, politicians and governments in the boards and executive committees of regional and international sports associations to the use of mega events by nations and governments to the role that global governing bodies play in the legitimization of rulers. That recognition should lead to the creation of a charter and/or code of conduct that governs the relationship between sports and politics;
- ◇ A revisiting of the criteria for the awarding of mega events. This would involve inclusion of international human, labour and gender standards in the awarding criteria as well as greater public engagement in the national and urban decision making process, enhanced transparency of the infrastructural requirements a host has to meet and the terms of the agreement between the sports association and the host. Sports associations will have to balance the infrastructural requirements of a tournament with the long-term needs, cultural identity and popular aspirations of host cities and ensure that its demands are in line and balanced with overall urban and municipal policies rather than at the expense of. They will have to also revisit their positioning as supra-national entities that are laws unto themselves.
- ◇ A restructuring of regional and international sports associations that is governed by regulation of the relationship between sports and politics, takes grassroots into considerations and ensures that grassroots voices are heard, and enshrines independent oversight, monitoring and auditing that gives credibility to combating and preventing abuse of power, mismanagement and corruption.

This is a tall order that entails not only structural adjustment but also a shift in the mental paradigm and a cultural transition. It is not an agenda that can be achieved with a stroke of the pen and will likely take significant time. It is likely to be a process that at times will be bumpy. Bumps will include sports-related protests like those in Brazil and often involve organized sports fans. Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff ensured that her government was in front of the curve by recognising the legitimacy of non-violent protests, describing them as an enhancement of her country's democracy and responding to protesters' complaints. Her proactive approach like that of Moroccan King Mohammed VI to the Arab Spring demonstrations in his country offers sports associations and others a model. Others like Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and various deposed Arab leaders provide cautionary tales.

The late economist Albert Hirschman argued that protest can lead to "a new, more cohesive democratic order being produced." Recognition of the fact that non-violent protest is a pillar of a democratic, open and pluralistic society places the risk of failing to have one's ear to the ground into perspective. Protest is no longer simply a disruptive element that despoils a major event. Instead, events by becoming platforms in effect contribute to the development of healthy societies. They are nevertheless also events that frequently could have been avoided and made explosions of pent-up anger and frustration less likely if public sentiment had been taken into account earlier.

The decade between 9/11 and the first popular Arab revolts in 2011 illustrates both the clarifying effect that protest has, even in its most violent form, and the risk in failing to recognize and acknowledge simmering discontent. That illustration contains lessons not only for governments but also for managers at all levels, including those of regional and national sports associations.

Proactive Anticipation Rather than Defensive Reaction

In the immediate aftermath of the Al Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001, government officials from then U.S. President George W. Bush down, think tanks pundits and the media

blamed the attacks on widespread discontent with repressive rule in the Middle East. That assumption was reinforced by recognition that a policy that gave priority to stability by supporting autocratic regimes rather than to ideals of dignity, justice and economic opportunity had created the circumstances that made the 9/11 attacks possible.

In response, much attention was focused in the wake of 9/11 on the Arab street, the code word for public opinion in the Middle East and North Africa. The expectation was that the Arab street would express its aspirations. Attention to the street diminished when it did not live up to the expectations of officials, analysts and journalists who began to deride those who stressed the need to be more attentive to Arab public opinion. Like the autocratic regimes against whom they revolted, Western officials, analysts and journalists wrote off a whole generation and class.

In reality however, while the change in mood in Western capitals was a reaction to the fact that the Arab street did not conform to the West's time frame, nothing on the ground had changed. Pent-up anger and frustration had not dissipated. On the contrary, it continued to fester and boil at the surface. It was noticeable to anyone who put his ear to the ground. The only thing that was not predictable was what would cause that anger to boil over and when that might happen.

It should have been clear from the outset that once Tunisian fruit vendor Mohamed Bouazizi's suicide on the doorstep of the governor's office went viral, his cry was not simply one for justice, freedom and economic opportunity but, first and foremost, an act of desperation in the face of humiliation, a cry for dignity that resonated with the masses across the region as well as around the globe. From Sao Paulo to Istanbul and from New York to Cairo the outcry was against the indignity of crony capitalism and neo-liberalism which ensured that rules are rigged in favour of elites, to the disadvantage of the middle classes. For Bouazizi and the millions in the Middle East and North Africa whom he inspired, it was the daily humiliation and police brutality meted out by repressive autocratic officials and their cronies that dominated their ordinary lives

Theirs is a massive denunciation of years of political and institutional decay, the voices of long-standing criticism

of the status quo as well as the generational desire for political change and safeguards of democratic freedoms rather than the expression of new ideas. At times, the denunciation is preceded by the emergence of political groupings that are as much characterized by discontent with the status quo as they are by ideology. In Egypt it was the Kefaya [Enough] movement that pioneered the use of social media, mastered the art of symbolic demonstrations and carved out space in the media; in the United States it was the Tea Party, a populist and libertarian movement that opposed the U.S. Troubled Asset Relief Program; in India the uproar towards corrupt telecommunications licence auctions; and in Europe the electoral turn towards far right-wing and green political parties.

In virtually all cases—Occupy Wall Street, the anti-Putin demonstrations in Russia and the series of revolts sweeping the Middle East and North Africa—the instigators were more often than not young, middle class and educated with no prior political affiliations driven by a globally shared perception that their political and economic systems were broken. Unlike the 1989 demise of communism their protests are sparked by a sense of disintegration across society not just at the system's nerve centre. Perhaps the most apt comparison for 2011 as a Year of Protest is the 1848 revolt in Paris that abolished the monarchy and established the French republic. Like in 1848

when a small act of protest mushroomed into a mass movement fuelled by technological advance of the time—telegraphy, railroads and printing presses—current protests are enabled by the Internet, social media and technology that circumvents censorship and enables free communications.

In the Arab world, it was the cannon fodder—the Mohamed Bouazizis or *shabab* [youth] of the Middle East and North Africa—that lost the most blood in revolts and displayed the most bravery because they had the least to lose. While religion may be a major influence in their lives, electoral politics despite the emergence of Islamist forces, has not provided the channel for the pursuit of their political ambitions. That is largely because they, like many protesters across the globe, are driven by what they don't want rather than any concept of what they want as is evident in Egypt and Turkey.

The protests represent an irreversible trend despite the fact that protest and revolution more often than not follow Lenin's principle of one step forward, two steps back. Nonetheless, for governments as well as for sports associations the choice is proactively embracing the kind of changes that address protesters' fundamental concerns or being taken by surprise and possibly being swept away by a tidal wave that has proven to be irresistible.

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The S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) is a professional graduate school of international affairs at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. RSIS' mission is to develop a community of scholars and policy analysts at the forefront of security studies and international affairs. Its core functions are research, graduate teaching and networking. It produces cutting-edge research on Asia Pacific Security, Multilateralism and Regionalism, Conflict Studies, Non-Traditional Security, International Political Economy, and Country and Region Studies. RSIS' activities are aimed at assisting policymakers to develop comprehensive approaches to strategic thinking on issues related to security and stability in the Asia Pacific.

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