

Can Sport Mega-events Clean a Dirty State Image?

Written by Sigmund Loland

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SIGMUND LOLAND, DEC 7 2021

Some states accused of human rights violations use major sporting events to distract the criticism and embellish their reputation. Is it time for radical sanctions and boycotts to end the practice of sportswashing? Major sporting events such as the Olympics or the World Cup capture the world's attention. Billions of people follow the events via various media outlets and digital platforms. Hence, there is the possibility of reaching a global audience with messages of many kinds. This can be handled in both constructive and problematic ways. Most organizing cities and states seem to use mega-events in line with the Olympic ideal of enlightened patriotism. With grandiose ceremonies, high-tech facilities, and (if possible) sporting success for the home team, the aim is to demonstrate progress and social and cultural flourishing with no substantial claims on superiority or dominance. The 2006 Soccer World Cup in Germany showing cheering and playful Germans challenged the international cliché of a controlled and disciplined people. The opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympic Games included humor and a series of popular-cultural references. Agent 007 James Bond parachuted the Queen into the stadium, and the Spice Girls were reunited. A global audience smiled and followed the rhythm.

There is however also the possibility of exploiting sporting mega-events in problematic ways. Historically, some events have been means to strengthen aggressive, totalitarian regimes. Hitler's 1936 Berlin Olympics, the so-called Nazi-Olympics, was a carefully planned propaganda show. With drilled groups on the bleachers forming the head of Lenin and the hammer and the sickle, the opening ceremony of the 1980 Moscow Olympics was embedded with communist symbols. Often, political and ideological exploitation is combined with a bread and circus-strategy, as when the Argentine hosted the soccer World Cup in 1978. Post-Peron Argentina was in the hands of a military junta eradicating the opposition with torture and executions. The tournament, ending with the Argentinian team beating the Netherlands in a controversial win, was used for whatever it was worth to silence the opposition internally and externally. The 1978 World Cup is referred to as 'the beautiful game's ugliest moment'.

The Argentinian case is an early version of what today is called sportswashing. Sportswashing implies a state's unbalanced and to a certain extent false portrayal of progress and well-being to cover problematic policies and practices, in particular human rights violations. Mega sports events are used to clean a dirty reputation.

Current sportswashing controversies relate to two upcoming events in 2022: the Winter Olympic Games in Beijing in February, and the soccer World Cup in Qatar in November. Both organizing states are accused of significant human rights violations. In China, among other things, the concern relates to oppression of the Uighur minority, in Qatar to the violation of immigrant workers' rights.

One part of the controversy is the critique of international sport organizations. How can organizations with visions of making the world a better place through sport award important events to totalitarian states accused of human rights violations? These organizations have long hovered in a non-transparent trans-national sphere without real exposure to critical scrutiny. Their structural setup, distribution of power, and election procedures have opened for secret deals and corruption. In simple terms, events have been sold to the highest bidder.

The situation has changed, however. In the last decades, and due to corruption scandals, organizations such as the IOC and FIFA have been confronted by increased requirements on transparency and social responsibility. In several aspiring Olympic cities such as Hamburg, Oslo, Boston, and Chicago, the IOC has been met with anti-Olympic

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protests, and bids have been cancelled. In the FIFA case, commentators and supporter activists have called for a complete boycott of Qatar. Hence, over the last years, the bidding and selection process of mega-event organizers has changed. Among other things, future organizers must report on and meet strict requirements on the human rights situation. In this sense, the development is positive.

The challenge remains, however, of how to deal with the 2022 events. One obvious possibility is a full boycott; athletes, teams and representatives of all kinds protesting by staying at home. A full boycott does not necessarily lead to change, however (Gomez 2018). If the objective is the strengthening of human rights, further efforts are needed. In their analysis of more than six decades of boycott sanctions, Felbermayr et al. (2020) estimate an overall success rate of 34%. The rate for sanctions related to human rights is lower: between 25% and 30%. Successful sanctions seem to share some core features:

- There is broad, multilateral support from both government authorities and other actors, that is, multilateral boycotts, preferably initiated by the UN Security Council.
- The boycotted party is dependent in some way on the boycotting parties, primarily politically and economically.
- With respect to human rights, it is more effective to bind an actor to commitments than to try and reduce rights violations.
- The objectives of the boycott should be limited and clear-cut. It is easier to apply a sanction to free a political prisoner than to achieve system change.
- It is easier to achieve objectives in democratic than in authoritarian or theocratic regimes.

As Galtung (1967) observed, boycotts may also have unintended consequences, such as costs to an innocent third party (often the civilian population) and strengthened resistance to the boycotting party on the part of the boycotted. In other words, to create real change, boycotts require careful analyses, extensive coordination, and loyalty among many parties.

Another option is to take part while at the same time protesting in one way or the other against human rights violations. In a comprehensive study, Murray (2018) points to the possibilities of 'soft power' in what he calls 'the new sports diplomacy'. What was previously a sphere of states and governments is today a complex system of additional actors with a diversity of objectives: influential athletes and teams, NGOs such as Amnesty International, media corporations and sponsors, inter- and supranational bodies with active sport policies such as the EU, and activist groups exemplified by soccer supporters or anti-Olympics campaigners. In contrast to the more formal and established diplomatic channels, sports diplomacy is flexible, fluid, innovative, transparent, and activist, and seems to possess an interesting potential for impact and change.

Murray (2018) offers multiple examples of how to realize the potential. During the 2014 Sochi Olympics, Obama sent openly gay ex-athletes as official representatives. One of them was the outspoken tennis legend Billie Jean King. The stunt was a clear protest against the gay legislation in Russia and a gesture of solidarity with the Russian LGBT society. A recent example is a message on the Norwegian national soccer team's warm-up T-shirts during one of the World Cup qualifier games: 'Respect on and off the pitch!' Another example comes from Denmark where main sponsors have freed the space on the national soccer team shirts to enable human rights messages. On the one hand, the initiative no doubt is driven by ideals. On the other hand, this is creative marketing. By removing the logo, a company comes through as socially and morally responsible and builds goodwill.

One option, however, is easy to clear off the road. No leader, neither from sports, politics, NGOs or the commercial sector, can go to Beijing or Qatar without a clear plan on how to deal with the accusations of human rights violations. The critical spotlight on the organizers is increasing in strength. Actually, one is left wondering whether the very idea of sportswashing loses force. For repressive states and regimes, hosting mega-events might do more harm to their international image than to promote it.

Managed by responsible organizations with political and diplomatic insights and competence, sporting mega-events can become a true detergent in the fight against the dark spots of repression and human rights violations. The Beijing

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Olympics and Qatar World Cup might become the turning points after which sportswashing becomes a less attractive option.

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