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Should Only Democracies Host International Sports Competitions?

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Qatar is holding the World Cup, the true “super bowl” of international sports. What the world calls “football” is actually played mostly with the feet and attracts a rapt audience almost everywhere on earth except in the U.S. For many nations, hosting the football championship, held every four years, is less complicated and more desirable than holding the Olympics.

However, in today’s world, in which almost everything is presented in terms of democracy and autocracy, the bad guys seem to be winning on sports. For soccer, there is Qatar, which this year is under fire, especially for its treatment of gays and migrant workers. Russia, now a Western pariah, hosted the soccer tourney in 2018. For the Olympics, China starred this year with the winter games and in 2008 with the summer competition. Russia took the 2014 winter fest.

Yet while these individual examples seem spectacular, the list of offenders is less than impressive. In fact, few oppressor states get to host such contests. In practice, the issue today is China. Russia used to be a busy host, but because of the Ukraine war, it is unlikely to garner serious consideration for years to come. Other candidates might make a sporadic appearance but will likely be few in number: hosts must be able to pay for the sporting facilities, the country must be comfortable and safe enough to welcome masses of international visitors, and it must be sufficiently stable economically and politically to make long-term plans.

Over the last half-century, Russia (and the Soviet Union) played host three times for the 1980 Summer Olympics (USSR); the 2014 Winter Olympics, and the 2018 World Cup. China hosted twice: the 2008 Summer Olympics and the 2022 Winter Olympics. Only three other unfree states made the list: Argentina 1978 World Cup (then ruled by a military junta); Yugoslavia 1984 Winter Olympics (communist but never a member of the Warsaw Pact); and Qatar 2022 World Cup (designated by Washington as a major non-NATO ally).

There have been other authoritarian bidders, but most likely failed for other reasons, most importantly the capacity requirement: Cuba, Egypt, Azerbaijan, Morocco, Iran, and pre-revolutionary Libya and Tunisia. Some dubious democracies also have unsuccessfully submitted proposals — Malaysia, Nigeria, and Turkey (Freedom House rates the first two as partly free and the third as unfree). Future World Cup and Olympic competitions that have been set are going to democratic hosts.

Why have the baddies, most obviously China and Russia, so often made the list? One reason is cost. Democratic states must sell sports extravaganzas to skeptical publics. Even local sports stadiums run into well-grounded opposition in America. After all, why should billionaire owners and millionaire players collect subsidies from the rest of us? Ideologically, I'm not a big fan of looting high earners with confiscatory income tax rates, but in the case of sports franchise holders who believe themselves entitled to my money, I'm prepared to make an exception.

Moreover, claims of great economic benefits from such "investments" tend to be biased surveys at best and fraudulent propaganda at worst. That is especially true for a one-time sports extravaganza, like the Olympics or World Cup, which is likely to litter a city or region with white elephant sports facilities of only minimal use afterward. For instance, Brazil, a country with vast income inequities, spent \$11.6 billion to host the 2014 World Cup: today "the Mane Garrincha Stadium in Brasilia, which cost almost \$1 billion to build, is being used as a bus depot." That doesn't mean no one benefits from such festivities, but usually it is the influential and well-

connected who profit most, with the rest of the population paying the bills. Authoritarian regimes are better able to push through such economic and political headwinds.

This is particularly important for big international games, which tend to be much more expensive. Sometimes hosts teeter on the brink. As 2004 approached, Olympics officials were worried about whether Athens, Greece, would finish preparing in time. It did, but it might not have been a good investment for a country just *five years away* from a wrenching financial crisis.

Qatar has spent an astonishing \$229 billion on the World Cup, a record. Indeed, “that total is almost five times the combined amount of \$48.63 billion spent on the events that decide national soccer supremacy from 1990 to 2018,” according to CNBC. What European country would commit to that kind of expenditure today? Nor would the U.S., especially on a sport that remains secondary here.

There were initially six bids for the 2022 Winter Olympic games. However, four cities dropped out, largely because of cost. Oslo, Norway; Krakow, Poland; Stockholm, Sweden; and Lviv, Ukraine. The problem was not just sporting facilities, but “ridiculous demands” from the International Olympic Committee. That left only Almaty, Kazakhstan, and Beijing, China, both rated unfree. And there was no doubt that of the two the People’s Republic of China would be easier to visit and could better manage the competition.

Barring unfree states from playing host is intended to deny them the opportunity to both whitewash and showcase a discreditable government that violates human rights. The PRC’s role in 2008 that Beijing expected to highlight its rise occasioned criticism. Opposition was even stronger this year and included boycott campaigns. The latter never had much chance of success, however, other than a diplomatic protest that did little more than irritate Chinese officials. The moment to block an unfree host is when the International Olympic Committee or FIFA (soccer’s governing body)

makes their decision, not when planning and construction are complete and contests are imminent. Boycotts are largely ineffective and punish athletes more than anyone else.

Now Qatar, with the World Cup beginning, is the target of hostile fire. Like most governments in the Middle East, the Doha authorities are authoritarian, something that has never bothered the U.S. government. Autocracy was fine for Iran when the dictator was a U.S. ally. America presently defends the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which is rated *below China and Iran*; Bahrain, which barely edges out the Kingdom, though not by much; and the United Arab Emirates, which looks good only in comparison to the other two. Freedom House rates Qatar above them all, though it also is unfree.

Of course, not being as bad as the worst is scant praise and Doha should treat its citizens and expatriate workers better. Still, some of the criticism loses any sense of proportion. Qatar does not threaten, bomb, invade, and occupy other nations (compare China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the U.A.E., not to mention, er, the U.S.). Qatar does not kill civilians prodigiously in an aggressive war (Arabia and the U.A.E.), toss a million people in reeducation camps and create a surveillance state (China), imprison those who call war a war (Russia), murder and dismember critical journalists (Saudi Arabia), blockade and threaten to invade a smaller neighbor (Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E.), or call in a neighbor's military to sustain an unpopular, minority monarchy (Bahrain).

Qatar's offenses on top of a lack of democracy are still genuine — bad treatment of expatriate labor and criminal penalties against gays. Unfortunately, these practices are common in the Gulf. However, as the *Economist* observed, poor laborers still go because they are worse at home. As for criminalizing (all) sex outside of marriage, “such conservative but seldom-enforced laws are common throughout much of the developing world, and in almost all Muslim countries. Qatar hardly stands out.” FIFA's award of the World Cup to Qatar also was tarred by corruption, but then again, that also is not unusual for that organization. Even the U.S. government, whose people

have appropriated the name “football” for a game that little uses the foot, felt moved to issue criminal indictments of FIFA officials.)

Beyond the details of individual cases, there are good arguments for keeping politics out of the formal selection process. The first might seem like a tired mantra but remains valid: don’t politicize sports. For instance, the Carter administration’s 1980 boycott of the Moscow Olympics, backed by the threat to deny passports to U.S. athletes, gained some three score adherents but achieved little other than causing the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies to boycott the 1984 Los Angeles games. Why undermine international competitions for no serious gain?

Earlier this year, Britain’s Boris Johnson government decided to highlight its anti-Russian position and pressured Wimbledon to bar Russian tennis players from the tournament — even if they opposed the war and lived overseas. Naturally, the All England Lawn Tennis Club submitted. To the shock of all concerned, Vladimir Putin *did not* respond by ending the war against Ukraine, calling democratic elections, resigning his position, and presenting himself at The Hague for trial. Instead, players were unfairly treated and the tournament was tarnished by the exclusion of several top players and the denial of rating points by players’ associations.

Sports is not sacred but turning it into a political weapon undermines a universal human endeavor that delivers pleasure to so many. It helps bring together people from nations at odds and even at war, acting as a small but still useful means to promote greater international comity. Moreover, the existence of forums in which all peoples can participate is a tribute to the best of diversity and tolerance — and publicly embarrasses those who invidiously discriminate. For instance, Iran’s Supreme Leader recently reiterated his directive that Iranian athletes not play Israelis in any international competition. This policy regularly tarnishes the reputation of the Islamist regime.

Even though not many unfree states end up hosting international events, treating such governments as equals encourages them to participate. Imagine proposing a directive, whether formal or

informal, that no one not approved by the U.S. and its allies would be eligible to hold a major international competition. First, it likely would be defeated, with most of those who abstained at the UN regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine likely to oppose a restriction effectively directed *at them*. What would better unite Tajikistan and Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran, China and India, Nigeria and South Africa, and scores of other states than a Washington proposal to police athletic competitions, excluding countries it declares to be unfree based on criteria it defines?

Indeed, who would be safe from exclusion? Turkey is formally democratic but rated unfree by Freedom House. Although its overall score is slightly better than that of Qatar, the latter gets a better grade for civil liberties. Nigeria also is democratic and limps over the line as partly free. Would it be eligible to host the World Cup or Olympics? What of Hungary, formally democratic and a NATO ally, but rated only partly free, barely above India? Colombia, a democracy and U.S. favorite, comes in at a similar level. In or out? The *Economist* tartly observed of the World Cup: "Unless FIFA wants the tournament to rotate among Finland, Norway and Sweden, it cannot always hold it in a blameless spot."

If democratic states succeeded in creating a two-tier system, those nations denied full rights probably would go elsewhere. The sporting world could be split in two, which would destroy the purpose of international competitions. In an alternative system, most large events would end up in a handful of countries capable of hosting them, almost always starting with ... China. It would be an ultimate irony to end up enhancing China's role while attempting to limit it.

Second, perhaps an even better reason to leave politics formally out of the selection process is that an authoritarian regime acquiring one of the games is drinking from the famed poisoned chalice. Far from legitimizing autocracy, such extravaganzas, by drawing in athletes, tourists, and journalists, now seem to increase foreign scrutiny of human rights violations and desperate efforts to forestall criticism.

Prior to the latest World Cup, most people around the world probably knew little about Qatar. Now they know a lot. And they have heard as much if not more criticism than praise, especially from civil society organizations. Athletes also are planning protests. Some are making critical videos, others plan to wear armbands or T-shirts with messages. The U.S. soccer team is including rainbow colors in the U.S. soccer federation's crest.

At least some tourists are likely to protest. Those who do could face prosecution, but doing so would be more than a little embarrassing for Doha, generating a cascade of negative publicity after the competition has ended. Journalists will be on hand to record obnoxious official behavior for the world to see. For instance, making the rounds on Twitter a few days ago was the threat of a Qatari official to break the camera of a Danish crew: The government apologized.

In short, modern technology and social media have intensified both the good and bad of hosting a global event. People around the world learn more about your country. Alas, they learn about both good and bad. The challenge of responding to this reality starts well before the event, with local officials strategizing on how to deal with a potential influx of critics. During the competition, governments must decide how to apply liberty restrictions to a large number of temporary visitors. Afterward, PR officials must confront the inevitable embarrassments.

Perhaps the best example of blowback from hosting a big event is Argentina. In 1978, the military, which tossed opponents out of helicopters, was in power and hoped to burnish its image by hosting the World Cup. The PR firm Burson-Marsteller planned a campaign to "help put Argentinian reality in its correct perspective." While the regime might have gained some internal credibility as a result of the competition, that didn't prevent its collapse five years later after the Falklands War with Great Britain. And internationally Buenos Aires suffered substantial blowback:

Journalists picked up the critiques of NGOs like Amnesty. A popular bumper sticker at the time depicted a football covered with barbed wire. A member of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, the

organization of mothers of Argentina's disappeared, told me in 1993: "It's thanks to the World Cup that we became known around the world." Amnesty staff argued internally that the tournament had ratcheted up scrutiny of a previously overlooked regime. Some countries had begun taking in more Argentinian refugees. Engagement had achieved something, partly because the anti-communist Argentinian regime cared what its western allies thought.

China's and Russia's crimes were much better known when they organized international competitions and the conversations surrounding their role added even more attention. There is little evidence that either regime acted any better as a result — indeed, Beijing sought to keep known dissidents away from foreign tourists. However, with repression the bedrock tactic for the Chinese Communist Party to remain in power, there is little the West can do to change Chinese policy. The 2008 summer games might have helped mark Beijing's international arrival. Overall, however, the host regimes probably gained little in terms of PR. Moscow's and Beijing's ill reputations were too well established for the regimes to benefit much from holding a sports competition.

What of Qatar? Simon Kupar of the *Financial Times* argued that "As in 1978, media amplified the NGOs' critiques." The 2017 Saudi/Emirati blockade also encouraged Doha to begin addressing Western criticisms.

Explained Kupar: "Qatar began announcing labor reforms. It pledged to make changes to the 'kafala' system which let employers deport workers or stop them leaving the country. It signed an agreement with the International Labor Organization and entered dialogue with human-rights groups." Even Amnesty International acknowledged progress: "Reforms enacted by Qatar since 2017 include a law regulating working conditions for live-in domestic workers, labor tribunals to facilitate access to justice, a fund to support payment of unpaid wages, and a minimum wage. Qatar has also ratified two key international human rights treaties."

Still, critics noted that Doha's implementation has been slow. Qatar has not recognized the right of migrant workers to unionize and limited new labor standards to tournament construction. And little has changed involving political and religious restrictions, though the unofficial word is that the government will not target gay tourists, for instance. Finally, once the games are over, Doha could backtrack.

Yet the status quo will have shifted. Instead of fighting each other, soccer fans in Europe have been protesting against Qatar in their home countries. Activists aren't likely to disappear once the games end. And human rights NGOs will seek to hold Doha accountable for its commitments. The World Cup has elevated Qatar as a nation, but also as a target of human rights advocacy.

In addition, Qatar will have lived through a major influx of foreigners who hold very different beliefs than its more conservative residents. One hotel worker observed: "Hell's gonna break loose. There's gonna be chaos everywhere, demanding guests, drunk guests." Indeed, the government already is planning to accommodate what might be called un-Islamic behavior: "There has been acceptance that, for the tournament, the authorities will need to adopt a lighter-than-usual touch. One of the more bizarre recent revelations is that organizers will arrange designated sobering-up zones where supporters will be forced to spend time if they get carried away." These might not be the most ennobling activities, but they will force the monarchy to compromise publicly with the foreigners whom it has invited to attend the World Cup.

The world is endlessly interesting. However, that means much of it doesn't look or act like Americans would like. So, they want to fix other nations. Especially by spreading liberty to all peoples. And we've tried. Alas, it isn't as easy as it looked, like at the current World Cup.

One of the bad ideas is to limit sports competitions to democratic or free systems. Not every aspect of international life need be politicized. If hosting events become permanent political battlegrounds, what will be the criteria for excluding countries? What if other governments refuse

to become second-class members of sports organizations and turn every Olympics and World Cup over to the West?

Most important, limiting eligibility to host isn't likely to free anyone anywhere or change any government's policy. On the contrary, doing so would eliminate an opportunity to subject authoritarian states to global criticism. China's and Russia's recent stints as World Cup and Olympics hosts garnered substantial obloquy. And more Europeans, especially, now probably know about Qatar's rather mundane flaws than Saudi Arabia's aggressive war-making and brutal political persecution.

Technology has helped democratize human rights activism. People no longer need to wait for their governments to act. "The street" increasingly may prove more powerful than the traditional back rooms in which sporting decisions once were made.

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