

Room for Debate: A Running Commentary on the News

Can World Soccer Root Out Corruption?

After a recent spate of match-fixing scandals, can the sport's governing body restore confidence in the game?

Holding the Agency Accountable

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International soccer is being overseen by 20th-century organizations in a 21st-century world. Even before the latest allegations of match-fixing surfaced in the past weeks, this time in Turkey, the Council of Europe had served notice that governments were going to have to play a larger role in protecting against corruption.

But when nations have tried to help regulate the sport, FIFA, soccer's world governing body, has fought back. Last month, the Belizean government suspended its national football federation, accusing it of holding rigged elections and failing to disclose its accounts. FIFA summarily suspended the nation for "interference," briefly barring it from qualifying for the 2014 World Cup. The government wrote to FIFA asking it to "respect the sovereignty of our nation and not impose its will on our people." Perhaps recognizing the bad impression this situation might leave, FIFA backed down and lifted its suspension for a few weeks, agreeing to send a delegation to Belize to discuss a resolution to the issue.

The case of Belize points to a much larger problem with FIFA: the organization sits outside almost every mechanism of accountability to its stakeholders, which include large corporations, nations around the world and – no overstatement – most people on the planet. FIFA's independence is not a problem when everything is going fine. But accountability becomes much more important when FIFA officials are themselves accused of corruption, as they have been in a bribery scandal over how the World Cup host cities are chosen and more recently in the election for FIFA leadership.

This kind of crisis is not unprecedented. The International Olympic Committee went through a major reform about a decade ago after corruption was revealed in the organization. It took the insistence of governments (notably the U.S. Congress), leadership within the I.O.C. and the active support of corporate sponsors for reform to occur. And when it became clear in the late 1990s that independent sports authorities were incapable of dealing with the growing problem of doping in sport -- highlighted by the numerous scandals in the 1998 Tour de France -- a new quasi-governmental organization was created, the World Anti-Doping Agency, to more effectively implement anti-doping policies.

Such experiences suggest that to more effectively deal with corruption in international football, we should push its governance bodies in the direction of reform, creating a closer relationship between FIFA and national and international governments. How long and painful the process will be is an open question.

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