



# THE TROUBLE WITH SPORTSWASHING

Carrie Booth Walling and Stacey M. Mitchell

The 2022 Soccer World Cup in Qatar has been criticized as another example of “sportswashing,” a practice that has also been used by countries such as Russia and China. Sportswashing involves the use of sport as a public relations tool to distract attention from a country’s poor human rights record. Although Qatar’s human rights transgressions do not reach the same level as those of China or Russia, it is undeniable that the use of sporting events by any country to lessen the seriousness of its human rights abuses is a crucial matter that warrants worldwide attention, as well as a reevaluation of how worldwide sporting events are awarded to countries. Sponsoring organizations must look beyond the goals of neutrality and maintaining harmonious relations with host governments and place the protection of human rights at the forefront with their decision-making.

## What is Sportswashing?

Hosting a major sporting event (MSE), owning a popular sporting club, financing a popular team, or bankrolling a new sporting league is part of a broader strategy that repressive states use to “wash” their global political image. Examples include the ownership of Paris Saint-Germain by the Emir of Qatar, the ownership of Manchester City by Sheikh Mansour of the United Arab Emirates, and the creation of the LIV Golf League by Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund. Moreover, by hosting a MSE, rights-violating governments seek to launder their reputations by presenting a sanitized, friendlier version of their regime. Major sporting events like the Olympics or the World Cup can increase the legitimacy of host nations and shield them from the negative consequences of their rights-violating behavior.

## “Sportswashing” through Major Sports Events: Qatar, China and Elsewhere

Although sportswashing has gathered increasing attention in recent years, it is not a new phenomenon. The Summer Olympics held in Berlin in 1936, and the FIFA World Cup held in Italy in 1934, were intended by the Nazi and Fascist regimes in Germany and Italy, respectively, to display the power of their regimes to the rest of the world. The 1936 Olympics gave Hitler a way to boost his global image, and dozens of athletes who competed were later murdered in the Holocaust.

Major sports events exacerbate human rights violations in host countries. Russia's hosting of the 2018 World Cup detracted attention from its use of authoritarian repression against its own population and the population of the Crimea region of Ukraine. At MSEs in 2022, people were cheering and applauding for regimes known for political repression, restricting media freedom, and violating the rights of vulnerable populations. China used the 2022 Winter Olympics to distract international attention away from the mass internment of the Uyghur and other Muslim populations in camps in western China. China has committed crimes against humanity and genocide in the Xinxiang province, including but not limited to arbitrary imprisonment, severe deprivation of liberty, torture, rape, measures intended to prevent Uyghur births, forcible population transfer, persecution, and enforced disappearances.

The head of FIFA, Gianni Infantino, declared the 2022 World Cup in Qatar the “best ever” for bringing greater international attention to the modernity and progress of the Arab world. Yet the 2022 World Cup repeatedly dominated news headlines for the risks it posed to marginalized populations. Qatar is home to an estimated two million foreign workers who exist on the fringes of larger society and enjoy few rights protections under Qatari law. According to sources, an estimated 6,500 foreign workers died in the 10-year process of building infrastructure to support the 2022 FIFA World Cup. The Kafala system of labor laws that until recently formally governed the hiring and employment rights of skilled and unskilled foreign workers in Qatar denied workers the right to a minimum wage, an acceptable standard of living, and the ability to freely change employment or leave the country. Human rights advocates have documented that the severe mistreatment of foreign workers in Qatar prevails in practice.

No less significant is the fact that women and girls in Qatar have few rights and freedoms, and minimal representation in the governing system. Social and economic equality for women and girls has declined since Qatar was awarded the World Cup, according to the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. Similarly, LGBTQ people in Qatar possess few rights. Same sex relations are illegal in Qatar, and members of the LGBTQ community are frequently harassed and imprisoned.

## Implications

Awarding MSEs to abusive governments condones the harm they inflict on marginalized populations. It also threatens the rights and safety of athletes and fans. Athletes and fans attending the 2022 Beijing Olympics were warned not to criticize the Chinese government or its human rights record or risk arrest. Athletes and fans in Qatar were threatened with sanctions to limit expressions of LGBTQ solidarity. Media restrictions and censorship accompany MSEs in repressive states.

The success of a MSE should be evaluated, at least in part, by the wellbeing of the population of the country in which it is held. Not taking into full consideration the human rights practices of a country like Qatar or China in the decision of where to hold a MSE sends a message of indifference at best, and at worst, tacit approval of the perpetration of egregious human rights violations. It is cheaper and more just for rights abusers to undertake fundamental human rights reforms to be eligible to host MSEs than to permit the expansion of wide-scale international crimes under the cover of sport.

# Recommendations

- Upcoming MSEs in India (Cricket Men's World Cup) and South Africa (Women's T20 World Cup in Cricket) should be conducted in a way that emphasizes equality and inclusiveness, not merely for participants but for the societies of the host states.
- A country's commitment to the protection and promotion of human rights must be weighed heavily in the bidding process by organizers of MSEs. At present Egypt, Indonesia and Russia have expressed interest in hosting the 2036 Summer Olympics. The selection of the host country for each MSE should be contingent upon their adoption of policies and procedures that are consistent with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. The sponsoring organization (like FIFA or IOC) should create a monitoring mechanism and ensure compliance with these standards.
- If human rights protection measures fail and human rights violations occur during the planning, preparation, or implementation phase of a MSE, survivors and the families of victims must be compensated, and those responsible must be held legally accountable.
- Countries should consider boycotting major sporting events where human rights are not adequately protected by the host country and the sponsoring organizations. To do otherwise puts vulnerable populations, athletes, the media, and fans at risk. Similarly, countries involved in mass atrocity crimes should be banned from participation in MSEs to shore up human rights and justice norms and the rule of law.
- If MSEs proceed in rights-violating countries, rights-respecting governments and the media should investigate and publicize allegations of human rights violations. Any coverage of the event by governments or free press should match event coverage with detailed coverage of the alleged crimes. To do otherwise is to be complicit in sportswashing, and even worse, to be complicit in human rights violations or mass atrocity crimes.
- Major sporting events like the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and the 2022 World Cup in Qatar were delayed in their start due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the dangerous desert heat, respectively. We can and must postpone other MSEs due to genocide and other mass atrocity crimes.

## Recommended Reading:

- Centre for Sport and Human Rights, [sporthumanrights.org](http://sporthumanrights.org)
- Fruh, Kyle, Alred Archer, and Jake Wojtowicz. "Sportswashing: Complicity and Corruption." *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 17, no. 1 (2022), 1-18.
- Johnson, Kurt. "Sportswashing, A History: Sports, Politics, and Autocracy." *Prospect: Journal of International Affairs*, November 11, 2022, <https://prospect-journal.org/2022/11/11/sportswashing-a-history/>
- Scharpf, Adam, Christian Glaßel, and Pearce Edwards. "International Sports Events and Repression in Autocracies: Evidence from the 1978 FIFA World Cup." *American Political Science Review* (2022).

About the Authors: [Carrie Booth Walling](#) [Stacey M. Mitchell](#)