

The Despotism Regime of the IHF Just Continues

by Christer Ahl, October 2013

Four years ago, at the Play the Game conference in Coventry, I offered an insider's view of how the President of the International Handball Federation (IHF) had abused his position in a variety of different ways. I was commenting about dictatorial methods, financial mishandling with personal gains for the President, disputes with WADA, and a regime characterized by coercion and a lack of transparency.

And as the real 'highlight', I told the story about how the President himself, together with Sheikh Ahmad of Kuwait, played a key role in having Olympic qualifying games manipulated. As President of Rules and Refereeing, in the end I had some success in getting the correct teams qualified for Beijing, through the Court of Arbitration for Sport, but it also meant that, after 32 years, my time in the IHF was over. At the IHF Congress in 2009, the President made sure that I was not going to be re-elected.

Soon after his own re-election in 2009, the President instructed the IHF Council, to vote in favor of his proposal to change his own position, as an elected official receiving 30.000 Swiss Francs annually, to a full-time President with a salary of half a million. This also gave him the excuse to move his office from Cairo to Basle, where he is now controlling all IHF communications and activities. These changes were never endorsed by the IHF Congress. But it was easy to get the IHF Council to go along, as he also increased their remuneration by an average of 500 percent. They now get amounts which for many of them are small fortunes that they could never risk, by going against the wishes of the President. The total amount of payments to the Council members exceeds two million Sw. Frs., i.e., more than the entire budget for IHF development aid.

The President also found other ways of ensuring his personal enrichment. He arranged with Sportfive, the holder of the IHF TV rights, to give him a personal services contract for 600.000 Euro, an unethical arrangement that got IOC President Rogge to condemn the action in public. But this was still a small matter in comparison with the accusations surrounding these TV rights for the following period. The President's main collaborator at Sportfive had left to establish UFA Sports, and suddenly UFA's bid was the highest one. The handling of the supposedly secret bids caused the authorities in Germany to start a criminal investigation involving police search in the homes and offices of both the President and the UFA boss. It first seemed that the President had been too shrewd to leave a damaging paper trail, but just recently a Swiss court ordered additional documents released to Germany, dismissing appeals from the IHF President, so the matter will perhaps finally become unraveled by the court in Hamburg.

Not long after the bid process, all the three key employees of the IHF were fired by the President, despite being regarded very highly. But they had one argument against them: they were the persons who witnessed the President's handling of the bids! Two of these officials were replaced by one person, who was made General Manager, Amal Khalifa, the President's loyal assistant from his days in Egypt. When hiring a new Marketing chief, he decided to show his disregard for image and appearances: he hired a Luc Weber, the son of the infamous chief operator in the huge ISL and FIFA scandal, a certain Jean-Marie Weber. Perhaps this was a favor to the President's role model Sepp Blatter. Another hiring was for the job of Media Officer, which also went to a loyal Egyptian, who now controls communications

I referred to an earlier dispute with WADA. Now it seemed that things were under control through the efforts of a very competent head of the IHF Anti-Doping Unit. But this person was too much inclined to follow WADA regulations, such as correctly keeping the plans for testing secret. When he kept refusing to share all the confidential information with the President, it was soon time for him to be fired. Eventually the President found his person also for this job, of course yet another acquaintance from Egypt. This man had the relevant experience, so this is not the issue, but obviously the President likes to show the world of handball that he does not care about appearances, and that nobody can stop him from doing what he wants. And of course, one wonders about the confidentiality issue these days.

Another area that invites controversy is the awarding of events. When the host for the Men's World Championship in 2015 was to be decided, France as defending champion was the clear favorite. But who came out ahead instead, if not Qatar. So their sudden success did not start with football. I am sure they will be able to do a good job, and at least the climate will not be an issue here. And Qatar has already had a cozy relationship with the President for many years, arranging annually a so called world championship for clubs, where Qatar gets to field several teams with borrowed players. So when a friendly environment was needed for the IHF congress earlier this week, of course he chose Qatar.

The President has made major efforts to change the IHF By-Laws to support his quest for autocracy and centralization. It is good to know that one can get away with ignoring the regulations but it is even nicer if the By-Laws allow what the President wants to do. Most important decisions, including financial matters, can now be handled without involving the Council. Continents and national federations find that they have lots of duties but very few rights. The clubs are not even regarded as stakeholders. Recently, some of the very top clubs took the IHF to court, as the IHF refuses to negotiate about critical issues, such as the competition calendar and compensation to clubs for releasing players for IHF events. The IHF President unilaterally dictates what the clubs get. If they disagree, then they get nothing.

The President has had two loyal followers, Vice-President Roca and Treasurer Sola. They may not have a lot of influence but they provide a good cover. Earlier this year, the Treasurer, who is a Croatian banker, found himself arrested on charges of fraud, embezzlement and money laundering. After a few months he was released, and it is unclear if the matter has been closed or remains open. But it should still raise serious questions about his continued suitability for a position as IHF Treasurer. However, if you did not already know it, you will not now be surprised to learn that the President and his closest collaborators were all re-elected for four more years earlier this week, without anyone finding it even worthwhile to try to oppose their candidacies. If you are loyal to the President, then you have the votes secured...

What I have conveyed to you here today is a sad and discouraging picture, which should make it clear how serious the governance problems in an international federation can be; and it illustrates that there are fundamental reasons why these situations are so difficult to resolve once they take root. On the basis of these observations and my overall experience, there are now five points that I would want to put on the table for our panel discussion later on:

- One vote per country looks like a sound basis for democracy, but it may only be an illusion. It can amount to camouflage for a dictator, who will easily be able to take advantage, especially if the vast majority of the member federations are uneducated, uninformed and unaware of what support they should have the right to expect. Handball has its traditions and continued strength in Europe. Only two or three countries in each of the other continents are competitive internationally. But we have about 120 voting member federations from these continents.
- An International Federation should not be allowed to limit itself to being a business spending Olympic revenue and TV rights money mainly on organizing World Championships and a few symbolic competitions in the continents. There must be standards for the development efforts, and there must be basic requirements regarding the statutes especially for decision-making, budgeting and accounting. Enforcement is possible through decisions on access to Olympic revenues and continued inclusion in the Olympic Games. Serious threats from the IOC can be effective but are regrettably very seldom utilized.
- Access to information about 'best practices' is great, but it only helps those who really want to change and improve. Similarly, self-reporting is just as hollow as the notion of democracy for those who want to conceal and mislead. Genuine external monitoring is needed. Support is also needed for those who want to affect change from within. This includes mechanisms for the protection of 'whistle-blowers'. Some form of overarching agency with a mandate is needed.
- To achieve reform of FIFA is critical, not just for FIFA and the world of football. The state of affairs at FIFA and the attitude of its President have sadly made it a negative model for other organizations. Or at least it has created an excuse for others who think that their practices are not really so bad, if they compare with what they hear about from FIFA. So a clean-up at FIFA may indeed have a multiplier effect. Frankly, in some ways, the same can be said of the IOC.
- Apropos the IOC, its obsession about autonomy against political influence is hypocritical and can become an excuse for discouraging legitimate forms of oversight and influence. Media need to increase their focus on governance and anti-corruption. Sports fans need to become more engaged. A special responsibility must be assumed by sponsors whose concerns about image must be mutual. And non-governmental 'watchdog' institutions need to remain vigilant.

