

WORLD HANDBALL HI-JACKED BY ITS PRESIDENT
Structural problems, scandals and an urgent need for change

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Good morning, everyone!

It is great that there is an organization that can organize a conference such as this one, and I am very happy to have the opportunity to speak in front of this audience. But I do hope you will not take it as an insult if I confess that this was my second option!

I had my tickets ready to go to the Election Congress of the International Handball Federation in Cairo a few days ago, but I found out that political manipulations had left me completely without a chance to gain re-election as President of the Rules & Referees Commission. So here I am... But this presentation will not be about me, and there is no notion of 'sour grapes' here. It is 50 years since I first touched a referee whistle and it is 32 years since I took up my first position with the IHF, so I have had a life-time of fantastic experiences and encounters with wonderful people. So, I will always wish handball well, but it puts me in position to speak with authority about a very strange combination of good and bad aspects of handball at the international level.

The IHF annually gains a few new member countries, and we currently have 160. At every World Championship, senior or junior, there is always at least one first-time participant, so we are not a static group. In the last ten years we have tripled our income, through enthusiastic sponsors, TV contracts etc. And I think you will be surprised about the TV viewer statistics from the Beijing Olympics: handball ranked third, behind only track & field and swimming, but ahead of gymnastics, boxing, basketball and volleyball.

So how can it be that what you have heard more about in the media in recent years is not a success story but a series of scandals and accusations: conflicts with WADA, fraud in the Asian qualifications for Beijing, bribery accusations in the refereeing in Europe, large sums of money seemingly unaccounted for, personal gains and favors for the President, a critical election congress mysteriously awarded to the President's own country but apparently largely organized at IHF expense, participants (read: voters) receiving major financial support, etc. I will come to some of these items more in detail.

Well, the scandals and accusations are not the result of wide-spread wrong-doing. For the most part, they can be traced back to one person, the President himself. Most likely there are cultural factors at play, regarding a President's view of his role and his privileges. Undoubtedly personal 'hubris' contributes: someone who thinks he knows everything best is not likely to listen or to tolerate dissent. And then there is the basic human quest for power, a strong image, and personal gains in different forms. Whether we like it or not, I think we have come to realize that these aspects are as common in sports as in politics or business. After all, high-level sports IS politics and business.

Of course, one does not get away with so much without the open or quiet support of others. First, there is the element of naiveté: many are simply not prepared to believe that such behavior is possible and are not ready to react to it. But then, of course, there will always be some who have just the same idea of what a President can allow himself. And yet others find it smart to ride the coat-tails and gain some advantages in this way. But it is also easy to buy, or scare people into, silence. An autocratic leader can count on a certain 'don't rock the boat' mentality, if people know that personal likes and dislikes determine much of the decision-making.

In this regard, the structure of the IHF higher levels, especially the Council is dangerously one-dimensional, with a huge chunk of geographical representation, where the different continental representatives are all competing for 'slices of the same pie.' The allocation of events, courses, materials, and other forms of support, depends on not just having a good argument but also on remaining on the good side of a despotic President. The composition of the Council needs to change, so that interested parties, especially the athletes, but also sponsors, media and others have the opportunity for direct access and participation.

What also need to change are the role of the Council and the role of the Executive Committee. In the current climate, the Executive is a secret entity, essentially with accountability to nobody, instead of serving as the Council's executive unit. By contrast, the Council has virtually no role in strategic planning and goal setting, which also means that the basis for a solid budget development and subsequent accountability is really non-existent.

The Council is also meeting very infrequently, in poorly prepared and managed meetings, lacking in focus and discipline, so that the results are often suboptimal and unclear. Legal guidance is normally missing, also when complex and controversial matters are on the agenda. When the Executive feels it needs to 'hide' behind the Council, the favorite method is to ask for support electronically, with the proposed decision considered accepted unless a majority has objected within a few days. This is an easy way out and, at least, it removes the opportunity for a genuine debate.

Within the Executive Committee, the President's situation has also been facilitated by the untimely deaths of two members in mid-term. Replacements have not been sought. Moreover, the Secretary General, who has attempted to serve as the conscience of the President or a 'whistleblower', has gradually been ostracized for his attempts to speak up, first internally and then, out of frustration, also externally. He has been physically locked out from access to his office and has received written rebuke, also in public. De facto, the Executive Committee has recently consisted of the President and the Treasurer.

I might insert that I myself have been threatened with suspensions on three occasions during the recent term, and another Council member, its only woman, has now been subjected to the same pre-election manipulations as I have, for no other reason than having had the courage to stand up to the President and speak or vote against his ideas.

Another concern is the lack of information and knowledge on the part of many national federations. It is not a derogatory remark but a statement of simple reality, if one claims that close to half of the member federations have only a faint idea of the inner workings of the IHF and of what they rightly should expect from the IHF. For their limited understanding they generally depend, for better or for worse, on guidance from their respective continental federation. This guidance can be inadequate or even manipulative.

This becomes especially awkward in the context of an IHF election. Suddenly most of the continental federations become power players, having a de facto influence or 'ownership' of large chunks of votes, and being in a position to strike deals that are more related to politics, power grabs and prestige than to well-informed decisions based on merit. Clearly, the IHF should assume a much greater role in keeping nations informed, but ignorance at the lower levels is known to be a preferred way of an autocracy.

At this point I will move on from structural issues to some details about some examples of recent scandals. When doing so, I should mention that, for both my sake and your sake, I will stay away from some 'juicy' issues, simply out of concern that they have remained at the level of seemingly well-founded accusations, while the 'smoking gun' has so far not been discovered. It is in the nature of an autocracy, with an Executive Committee consisting of two persons, that evidence is hard to come by. .

What nobody could conceal or doubt, however, was the conspicuous fraud involved in the Asia qualifications to the Beijing Olympics. Most of the focus was on the men's event played in Japan. Match segments on 'You Tube' soon showed the world that the deciding match had been completely decided in favor of Kuwait through intentionally and blatantly one-sided refereeing. When I later saw the complete game, it was clear that I had never seen anything worse. The match was assigned to referees who were not eligible for such a high-level event and had been brought in by the Asian federation behind my back, clearly for a purpose.

The women's event, organized in Kazakhstan, and without subsequent video evidence despite TV broadcasting, was better 'hidden' and did not become so well-known, despite vehement protests from the strong and favored Korean team against the referee-supported win of the home team.

What the two events had in common is that the IHF had nominated neutral top-level referees from Europe. However, the referees and the neutral supervisor were removed at the last moment from the women's event, and the specific nomination of the neutral referees for the deciding men's game was overruled, in both cases through direct intervention of the IHF President. This was initially noted by internal IHF sources and later became public knowledge in the CAS Tribunal. It appears that in both cases the Asian President had 'reminded' the IHF President about an agreement that Asia should have free hands to run these events. This was apparently a 'quid pro quo', following the last-minute withdrawal of an Asian threat to vote against an important IHF proposal earlier that year. In other words, the President had made himself vulnerable to coercion.

The IHF's handling of the dual problems was, as noted by CAS, clearly inept, first in the sense of an awkward three-month delay until the matter was placed on the Council agenda. The Council decided, after an unusually chaotic meeting, without the necessary rigor for such a vital issue, to order replays of both events. The video was never watched, and the Asians were never forewarned about the topic being on the agenda. During the course of the meeting, the Asian president put in a phone call to the IHF President to try to get him to prevail on the Council to drop the whole matter. Due to shoddy process, the CAS Tribunal later set aside the IHF Council decisions, but decided itself, 'de novo', to ratify the replay on the men's side. On the women's side, the evidence was found to be too circumstantial from a strict legal standpoint, so the initial Kazakh victory was upheld.

Another issue that I will comment on only more briefly, was the protracted dispute between WADA and IHF regarding the flawed application of WADA-regulated testing processes. Two members of IHF's anti-doping team also resigned due to unacceptable working conditions. The dispute involved for instance that the budget allocated would be inadequate for the prescribed testing, and the notion that the anti-doping team improperly was being asked to keep the President informed about testing plans that were to be kept secret. This latter point takes on a special meaning for those who witnessed the IHF pre-Olympic event in Athens in 2000. Apparently as a surprise, doping tests were announced immediately before the start. This caused a dispute, with the IHF President involved, and the non-participation of half of the Egyptian team when the match finally got under way.

Much has been written about special financial arrangements involving the President personally. One specific aspect is verifiable. In late 2007 it came to the attention of the Council that for some time the President had received reimbursements without receipts, for travel where tickets had been obtained elsewhere. This runs counter to IHF standard procedures, but had apparently gone on for some time, with the knowledge of the Treasurer. The Council did not insist on retroactive measures but wanted the practice stopped immediately. The President grudgingly backed down and promised immediate change. Quite amazingly, when the minutes of the meeting later appeared, they claimed just the opposite, that the Council had unanimously agreed that the President could continue his special practices. Every attempt to get the minutes corrected and the illegal practices stopped has been fruitless, including efforts to get other Council members to speak up and demand a change.

The biennial World Championships are the events creating large flows of money, involving IHF, organizers, sponsors, TV contractors etc. On several occasions, reports have been circulating within the IHF and/or in the media, regarding improper transfers, money put aside in a 'special account', and payments without service in return. I am not personally in the possession of any evidence, but there have been too many instances, with several of them accompanied by damaging documentation, so it has gradually become impossible to believe that it is all 'smoke without any fire'.

The final episode involves the very first instance where a referee couple was sent home during the course of a World Championship due to fraudulent refereeing. Again, direct

evidence of 'payment' for services would not be realistic to find. But when one notes that the referees, upon learning about their immediate departure, did not run to me or my boss to complain, but to two senior IHF officials from the country that improperly won the match, then one begins to wonder. When later on an official from the federation of the country of the referees calls to complain and gets the explanation from my boss, he shocks us with a revelation that comes very close to a 'smoking gun'. One of the two IHF officials from the winning country had called the federation of the referees long before the championship, asking about their family situation, hobbies and travel interests. You could never guess who the person was, making that phone call and that inquiry...

As we all know, there is a waiting list of sports who want to get into the summer Olympics. Accordingly, it is a rather unpleasant threat when an IOC official happens to comment that a sports federation seems so mismanaged that perhaps it would deserve to be kicked out of the Olympics. But it is my understanding that a main task of the IOC, and also entities such as CAS and WADA is to protect the rights of athletes to participate in the Olympic Games, and furthermore on a level playing field. This makes me feel that threats about exclusion are the last things that should come to mind when major problems are established or rumored. Athletes should never have to suffer the consequences of weaknesses or wrongdoing at the administrative level. If anything, IOC should see it as a responsibility to help remedy the problems, for the sake of the athletes of that sport.

I do not suggest that IOC itself would be a suitable organ for such intervention. It could create a conflict of interest, it could lead to suggestions of 'the pot calling the kettle black', and it would probably become clear that the necessary expertise is not at hand. Accordingly, it is my opinion that IOC should consider instituting, as a matter of urgency, an entity with monitoring and investigating capacity. This entity should be in a position to respond to requests for help from an international federation, it should be a place where a 'whistleblower' could turn, and it should have the right to launch investigations at its own initiative. But it should not be seen as a threat or weapon, but as a support mechanism, with the necessary competence to deal with issues about the appropriateness of statutes, adherence to statutes, leadership style and management structure, democratic participation in decision-making, internal and external communications flows, adequate representation for athletes and other key parties, and overall organizational efficiency.