

Sports washing: a slippery Saudi slope

November 2021

Premier League stadiums like to have a side-venture, to keep the money coming in. For Tottenham Hotspur, it is NFL games. For Arsenal, it is rock concerts. Now that Newcastle have been majority-bought by the Saudi Arabian led consortium Public Investment Fund, sadly the public entertainment that the new owners are used to is more decapitatory in nature than anything that has come before.



Let us not mince words. Newcastle United is now majority-owned by a regime that treats women with contempt, murders journalists, carries out medieval beheadings in public, and which has banned an official women's team from playing the very game they have now invested so much in. (The fact that many fans still wanted the PIF instead of Mike Ashley speaks volumes about all involved). There have been 'legally binding assurances' that the Saudi state will not exercise control over the club but given that Mohammed bin Salman is at once the Crown Prince, the chairman of PIF and the real power behind the throne in Riyadh, this is hardly credible.

The Premier League's Fit-and-Proper Persons test for owners and directors having thus been passed, Saudi Arabia is now able to sports wash its reputation by signing superstars, winning trophies, and hoping that *'Howay the lads'* drowns out the Amnesty International choir. This is not a new tactic. Abu Dhabi and Qatar did much the same with Manchester City and PSG respectively, in the specific football arena, but broadly speaking 'sports washing' and reputation-laundering have been practiced for as long as their authors have needed them to. Moreover, such regimes are legitimised by the very institutions, and countries, that claim a greater measure of morality. The Premier League, with the precedent set arguably as far back as Chelsea, could not back down now, and the UK government has been quite happy to sell weapons to Riyadh for use in the Yemeni bombings. We sell them our arms, why not our football heritage? More to the point, the UK government felt it had to refuse to reveal what advice it had given to the Premier League on the virtues of the takeover – to protect Saudi relations.

Indeed, a particularly suspicious mind might point out that the Saudi-led takeover of Newcastle that was mooted last year, failed because the Saudi state had banned Qatar's BeIn TV network, yet proceeded to show illegal streams of the 2018 World Cup to which the network had the exclusive regional rights. Intimations that Arabia intended to lift the ban came on 6th October, just one day before the takeover was announced. Football associations being more concerned with the respecting of broadcasting rights rather than human rights – now there's a novelty.

The sad truth is that the Newcastle takeover is just the latest, and loudest, example of the cottage industry that revolves around contemptible individuals/regimes that equate 'money' with 'right', and the swarms of corporate underlings that will happily service these desires in return for a chunk of that self-same money. If the behemoths can clean their reputation (particularly through such an emotional angle as football), and their functionaries are compensated for surrendering their principles (or indeed rewarded for not having any in the first place) – and the systems are clearly inadequate to challenge them – why would things change?

The recent release of the Pandora Papers proved this: wave upon wave of (charitably) controversial figures attempting to conceal their outright laundering/criminal activities, or to disguise any tax-optimisation or other legal-but-frowned-upon activities, so as to maintain the 'public' reputation. That such activity is vast in scope and passes largely unnoticed is a sorry reflection on the professional community that enables it, but just as important is the degree of reputational cleansing and washing that doesn't make the news because it is conducted through proxies, patsies, and suppression of the truth. And when firms genuinely looking to act for the good are embroiled in such activities, because they do not know the real persons or motivations behind their clients this only deepens the impression that such elite-driven cleansing is the 'norm'.

It would seem that 'the system' can clean anything – except a conscience.

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