



## **Sports: A Battlefield for Freedom of Expression and Political Change**

**by Dr. James M. Dorsey**

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,426, January 28, 2020

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Athletes, executives, and fans are turning sports in an era of defiance and dissent into a battleground for freedom of expression and political change, putting national and international sports associations that only nominally adhere to human rights on the spot.

The responses of sports associations to denunciations of repression in China's troubled northwestern province of Xinjiang and support for pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong by [soccer celebrity Mesut Özil](#), [Houston Rockets basketball general manager Darryl Morey](#), and rugby superstar Sonny Bill Williams, alongside soccer fans in regions like Morocco and Hong Kong, highlight the willingness of those associations to sacrifice their values for commercial gain in their dealings with autocratic nations.

They also puncture the fiction of a separation of sports and politics that sports associations have long employed to justify their often-close ties to government and dealings with countries irrespective of their records in upholding basic rights.

By distancing themselves from the statements of Özil and Morey (the former of whom has [ties to Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#)), English Premier League club [Arsenal](#) and the [US National Basketball Association \(NBA\)](#) have highlighted the discrepancy between their declared principles and their policies.

So has China with its penalizing of the [NBA](#) and [Özil](#).

The gap between professed principles and practice is even more yawning with the awarding of the 2021 FIFA Club World Cup to China despite Chinese president Xi Jinping's crackdown in Xinjiang and his moves to turn the People's Republic into a 21<sup>st</sup> century Orwellian surveillance state.

FIFA awarded the hosting rights [in a consultative rather than a transparent bidding process](#).

In a letter to Human Rights Watch, FIFA justified its decision by [insisting](#) that the Chinese football association as well as China as a nation have committed “to respect human rights in their activities associated with the tournament in accordance with internationally recognized human rights standards and FIFA’s own Human Rights Policy.”

It was not clear how human rights associated with the Club World Cup could be separated from the overall crackdown in China. Nor was it clear why FIFA would help Xi take a step toward [fulfilling his dream](#) of China first qualifying for the World Cup, then winning it and ultimately hosting the tournament.

The awarding casts doubt on [FIFA’s campaign against racism](#) in stadiums given that the crackdown in Xinjiang aims to force Turkic Muslims to violate principles of their faith and allow Xi Jinping to supersede Islam in their lives.

The re-emergence of sports as a battleground is not limited to the plight of Xinjiang.

Hong Kong fans recently took their struggle for greater democracy to a match in South Korea.

[Chinese and Hong Kong broadcasters refrained from showing the playing of the national anthems](#) when China and Hong Kong played each other in an East Asia Football Federation (EAFF) Championship match.

Hong Kong fans booed China’s anthem, chanted “Liberate Hong Kong, the revolution of our times,” and displayed Hong Kong’s British-era flag.

Support for national teams in autocracies like Egypt and Syria has dropped, with fans demanding the reform of regime-controlled football federations that are widely viewed as corrupt.

["Egypt's national team is also its national embarrassment](#) ... Plenty of Egyptians are basking in the team's loss today," tweeted journalist Karim Zidan in July after host Egypt crashed out of the African Cup of Nations.

Privately, many fans assert that the team represents the repressive regime of general-turned-president Abdel Fattah Sisi rather than its historically huge fan base.

Sentiments in war-torn Syria are no different.

“Anyone who knows Syria well knows that in Syria there are no independent institutions, and that includes sporting institutions... [Considering this \(national\) team as one that is above politics and a national team that unites people is a big lie and part of a certain propaganda](#),” said Syrian journalist Hala Droubi.

In Morocco last year, during a match that was being broadcast live on television in the northern city of Tetouan, fans dressed in black [booed the national anthem](#) in protest against the killing by the Moroccan navy of a 20-year-old student as she tried to cross into Spain illegally.

“These days, the [national anthem feels like a way to force patriotism onto us, so our reaction has been to boo](#),” said Zakaria Kamal, a PhD student in sociology and supporter of Raja Athletic Club of Casablanca (RCA).

F’bladi Delmouni, a song chanted by RCA fans, has gone viral and become the anthem of disaffected Moroccan youth, garnering [millions of hits on YouTube](#). Its lyrics read:

My country has wronged me...

We live in a cloud in this country

They have rendered us orphans to be judged on Judgement Day...

You stole the wealth of our country and shared it with strangers...

Somebody understand me...

This is my last word

I write it from my heart

Tears fall from my eyes

In a tweet to journalist Aida Alami, Gruppo Aquile, the composers of the song, said it [expressed a feeling among Moroccan youth that it does not matter whether they are dead or alive](#).

“Behind the title ‘F’bladi Delmouni’ hides the difficulty of living, the feeling of being a foreigner in your own country... We are Moroccan citizens. We live in a dying society, and the youth is asphyxiated,” the group said.

It is a sentiment shared by anti-government protesters across the globe from Latin America to Asia.

*Dr. James M. Dorsey, a non-resident Senior Associate at the BESA Center, is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University and co-director of the University of Würzburg’s Institute for Fan Culture.*