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Football & the Cyprus conflict - Steve Menary

Football and politics do not mix. How do we know this? Because FIFA tells us so.

Any political interference in a FIFA member means immediate suspension. Reigning European champions Greece were suspended by FIFA and UEFA in July 2006 because of political intervention by the Greek government [1].

This was not a one-off. Between 1998 and 2007, the football associations of Antigua & Barbuda, Azerbaijan, Cameroon, Guatemala, Iran, Kenya, Macau, Tajikistan and the Yemen have also been suspended for similar reasons [2].

FIFA did this to demonstrate politics has no place in football but what about when FIFA wants to get involved in politics?

This is exactly what FIFA is doing in letting football be used to try and resolve the ongoing political in Cyprus.

In 1934, clubs from the Greek and Turkish communities set up the Cyprus Football Association and played together in an all-Island league until 1955. That year, the

deteriorating social situation on the island saw Çetinkaya, the last Turkish Cypriot team to win the league in 1952/53, barred from playing a Greek Cypriot side Pezoporikos in Nicosia [3]. This led to the Turkish Cypriots splitting away to form their own association, the KTFF.

In 1960, the island gained independence from the UK and the Republic of Cyprus was formed. The CFA had joined FIFA in 1948 - 12 years before independence – and retained this membership although the Turkish Cypriots insist the independence deal allowed for separate football federations.

After independence, inter-communal violence in Cyprus escalated and the Turkish Cypriots withdrew to enclaves mainly in the north of the island. In 1974 Turkish troops invaded the island in an attack that left around 6,000 people dead.

A few years after the invasion, the Turkish Cypriots began playing ‘internationals’ against the likes of Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Libya and their Turkish sponsors [4]. This was tolerated by FIFA because, the Turkish Cypriots claim, of an agreement with then FIFA secretary Helmut Kaiser [5].

This deal ended in 1983, when the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus declared itself independent under nationalist president Rauf Denktaş.

This independence has only ever been recognised by Turkey, leaving the TRNC isolated and its footballers left in limbo. A national team existed but had no opponents. FIFA’s only member in Cyprus was the CFA and that was who FIFA backed.

In the mid-1990s, Turkish club Fenerbahçe held a training camp in the TRNC and planned a game against a local side but FIFA intervened. The game was never played

[6]. Around the same time, the KTFF applied to join FIFA but were unsurprisingly rejected [7].

The KTFF looked after 48 teams and three leagues but footballers from Northern Cyprus had nowhere to go to play at a higher level. The obvious place for ambitious players was Turkey but to the Turkish federation, the TRNC was a foreign country and their players were treated as overseas players.

Turkish Cypriots could get passports for Cyprus and play without restrictions but one of the first to do so in 2002, Sabri Senden, found himself branded a “weak character” by President Denktas for pursuing his career of choice [8].

In April 2005, Denktas was ousted and replaced as president by the moderate Mehmet Ali Talat. After this, a UK-based campaign, Embargoed, was began to help Turkish Cypriot athletes left in limbo by the conflict, such as the footballers. Talat’s election saw restrictions eased, the border opened and Cypriots from both sides crossed over regularly. Another Turkish Cypriot player, Coscun Ulusoy, played two seasons in the Cypriot league for Nea Salamina, only leaving because his mother-in-law was ill. His experience among the Greek Cypriots was only positive.

Ulusoy said: “I was always very friendly with the other Greek players, there were no problems. A lot of the Salamina fans know Turkish and they are to the left.

Sometimes the right side teams shout at me, but nobody hit me or nothing.” [9]

As the political atmosphere eased, the KTFF became more adventurous. The year before Denktas was removed, the KTFF had sent a team to Norway to play the Sami, the tribal people of northern Scandinavia. The KTFF also joined the Non FIFA (NF) Board, a new organisation for aspiring FIFA members.

In June 2005 and with Talat in power, the TRNC was confirmed at an NF Board meeting in London as the host for the first world cup for national sides that FIFA could not accommodate [10].

The KTFF's ambitions appeared sporting but within a year of Talat taking power, there were elections at the federation. The KTFF secretary who had liaised with the NF Board was replaced and relations broke down.

NF Board president Christian Michelis explained: "The new [TRNC] government expressed restrictions concerning the participation of some teams." [11].

No teams were mentioned but football representatives from Kurdistan, whose separatist movement the Turks have struggled to contain for years, were at the NF Board meeting in London.

The KTFF decided to stage a tournament anyway. Despite telling the NF Board they had no money, the KTFF poached a number of potential entrants from the rival event, such as Tibet and Greenland, by offering to pay their travel expenses. For isolated associations with no help from FIFA, this was crucial. For the NF Board, the sudden appearance of these funds was more proof that the KTFF's ambitions were political rather than sporting.

In November 2006, the KTFF hosted the Equality, Liberty & Fraternity Cup with eight teams. Non FIFA members entering included Greenland, Tibet, Zanzibar, Gaguzia - a semi-autonomous Turkish Christian region in Moldova - and the Crimea. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan also sent teams. Both are FIFA members so these teams featured players from the Kyrgyz and Tajik futsal leagues – a short-sided version of football.

As futsal has a different European federation, the European Union of Futsal, FIFA could not intervene but persuaded Afghanistan not to take up a place in the ELF Cup with the threat of fines [12].

The ELF Cup was not a big hit with the 250,000 residents of the TRNC, who prefer to watch the Turkish league on TV. Less than 1,000 people watched the final in Turkish Nicosia [13], where the hosts beat the Crimea 3-1.

The tournament gained some media coverage in the south but at a price. According to the organisers, the ELF Cup cost £135,000 to stage with sponsors providing half this sum and the KTFF the rest [14].

The KTFF had already funded trips to France and Norway for their national team. Is it realistic that a body with just 48 members, whose best supported side, Çetinkaya, only gets 2,000 fans at most for a big game, could afford this? [15].

The KTFF insist so but visiting teams had to stay in a state-owned hotel and fly via Turkey to the TRNC's only airport, Ercan, instead of a potentially easier route in through the south. All indications suggest the event was underwritten by some state funds.

By this time football was becoming more important in resolving the political situation.

In May 2004, Cyprus joined the European Union (EU) and were in a stronger position as Turkey aspired to do the same but could not with Cyprus and Greece in opposition.

The Turks and Talat's government agreed to a United Nations peace plan that would unite the island under one government supplied by two federal chambers below representing the Greek and Turkish communities.

The TRNC had given ground politically but could retain the notion of a Turkish Cypriot nation on the football field and emulate the UK model, which incorporates four national teams for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

TRNC prime minister Ferdi Sabit Soyer explains: “The United Nations solution has an idea for a common national team and a separate one. If we can have a common team that is good, but maybe we follow the UK plan.” [16].

After a referendum, the UN plans were rejected by voters in Cyprus. Turkey refused to give ground over opening up ports in Turkish Cyprus to Greek shipping and their EU membership talks stalled.

The ELF Cup appeared to make little impact with FIFA but did make a point. In the space of two years, the KTFF had staged the ELF Cup, another three-way tournament in 2005 with Kosovo and the Sami to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary, and sent the team on tour to France and Norway.

Unlike other aspiring FIFA members, such as Greenland and Gibraltar, the KTFF had money and was keen to demonstrate this to FIFA.

In January 2007, the KTFF sent the team off on another expensive tour. Northern Cyprus played two matches against club teams in Tanzania. A game against Tanzania – a FIFA member - was scheduled then cancelled after FIFA intervention but the tourists did visit Zanzibar, losing 2-1 to the hosts [17].

FIFA was still sticking to its line that politics had no place in football and refused to get involved.

Then in the summer of 2007, Luton Town Football Club of the English football league, were invited over to the TRNC for a summer training camp after their

manager, Kevin Blackwell, was contacted by Ces Podd, a former Bradford City player and coach with the St Kitts & Nevis national team, a FIFA member.

A match was scheduled between Luton Town and Çetinkaya for July 11 only for the CFA to complain and the game was cancelled. In retaliation, Turkish Cypriot politicians cancelled talks with the Greek Cypriot counterparts.

The cancellation of this match and resulting political row got more international media attention than all 15 ELF Cup games put together. FIFA finally got involved but why?

Blackwell says: “Luton had 23 players over there so we played a 20-minute training game against each other with the Çetinkaya players sitting on the touchlines. That story was beamed all over Turkey and Asia.

“I think we were used to a degree. I was put under a lot of pressure by the North Cyprus FA while I was over there. The day after that game, FIFA called the North Cyprus FA [18]”

After 50 years of isolation, that match, whether it was simply a friendly or a well-publicised political stunt, caught FIFA’s attention.

On September 20 2007, FIFA held talks at its headquarters in Geneva between the KTFF and the CFA. Afterwards in a statement, FIFA deputy general secretary Jérôme Champagne said: “We’ve made it clear there cannot be a second association. The only way forward is to uphold FIFA statutes.” [19]

But FIFA’s statutes allow Hong Kong and Macau to remain full members despite the former colonies now being part of China. In total, 23 of FIFA’s members are not

countries as recognised by the ‘international community’, which is FIFA’s main but rather vague admission criteria [20].

Long before the talks had started, the KTFF had told the CFA that they could not join the existing body and wanted a new association constituted [21]. Aware that a breakthrough could be achieved, the KTFF recruited Brussels lobbyists, Independent Diplomats, which had advised other disputed states on political settlements, such as Western Sahara.

After the first round of talks, Nicholas Whyte of Independent Diplomats said: “The signs are so far encouraging.” [22]

If, despite FIFA’s protestations, the KTFF manage to secure their own national team this demonstrates how football can be used as a political tool.

Even if that does not happen, it raises the question as to what FIFA, which so vehemently opposed any political interference in its own affairs, is doing intervening in a political matter? But FIFA already has a track record for this.

After the talks started, FIFA head of media Andreas Herren was asked why the governing body of world football intervened. He replied: “It is related to the Çetinkaya match and the fact that the current political situation could maybe be modified in the long term with the help of football.” [23].

So FIFA can involve itself in politics whenever the governing body of world football wants to but will not open itself up to political involvement in its own affairs. That is hardly a fair game.

Steve Menary is the author of Outcasts! The Lands That FIFA Forgot (Know The Score Books ISBN-13: 978-1905449316) <http://outcasts-book.blogspot.com/>

NOTES

- [1] 'Greece suspended by FIFA' uefa.com 3 July 2006 Available at
<http://www.uefa.com/uefa/Keytopics/kind=64/newsId=433810.html>
- [2] Correspondence with author October 2007
- [3] 'History of Cyprus Turkish Football Federation' Available at
<http://www.cypnet.co.uk/ncyprus/people/sports/football/ktff.htm>
- [4] 'Outcasts! The Lands That FIFA Forgot' (Know The Score Books)
- [5] Ibid
- [6] Ibid
- [7] Ibid
- [8] Ibid
- [9] Ibid
- [10] 'The New Federation Board World Cup' by Steve Menary *When Saturday Comes* July 2005
- [11] 'Outcasts! The Lands That FIFA Forgot' (Know The Score Books)
- [12] Ibid
- [13] Ibid
- [14] Ibid
- [15] Ibid
- [16] 'Can TRNC overcome sporting bans?' Cyprus Observer August 3 2007
- [17] 'Outcasts! The Lands That FIFA Forgot' (Know The Score Books)
- [18] Interview with author
- [19] 'Talks over football's future in Cyprus' fifa.com September 22 2007 Available at
<http://www.fifa.com/associations/association=cyp/news/newsid=602817.html>
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- [21] 'Outcasts! The Lands That FIFA Forgot' (Know The Score Books)
- [22] Correspondence with author
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