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# **Football and the authoritarian regime in Iran**

**Christian Bromberger**

**Abstract:** The history of football in Iran is made up of contradictory processes, as the weight of successive authoritarian regimes is counterbalanced by international regulations and by players and spectators' attitudes.

The state is trying to control the world of football and use it for its diplomatic relations. The article analyses the regime's fears and reactions to several phenomena that are dangerous for it: supporters' outbursts that run counter to religious morality, political protests in stadiums and women's demands.

**Keywords :** Iran, football, religion, contestation, supporters.

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The history of football in Iran is made up of contradictory processes, as the weight of successive authoritarian regimes is counterbalanced by international regulations and by players and spectators' attitudes. State control has been carried out on sports and their institutions, as well as on stakeholders (Heads of federations, coaches, players) but not without a reaction - especially from players. The state has also used football in its diplomatic relations.

This stranglehold of the state is also reflected in its desire to control the show, a show of which state power intends to make a symbolic profit but of which it dreads the turbulence. It is not only the crowd's carnival excesses that worry the authorities. Anxious for discipline and order, they also fear political protest, women's demands, and games that offer an opportunity for various claims. Before considering the various aspects and mechanisms of this state influence and of actors' reactions, I would like to briefly recall the main stages of the history of football under the two authoritarian regimes in Iran over the last century: the Pahlavi monarchy and the Islamic Republic.

## **A brief history of football in Iran**

It was not until the 1940s that football really took root in Iran<sup>1</sup>. The Iranian Football Federation was founded in 1946 and joined the International Federation

(FIFA) in 1948. This is very late particularly if we compare these dates with the dates of creation and accession to FIFA of neighboring countries' federations. The Lebanese federation was created in 1933 and joined FIFA in 1935; The Syrian one was founded in 1936 and joined FIFA the following year. The delay in the expansion of football is undoubtedly due - at least partially - to the place of the Iranian national sport, wrestling, a sport that earned Iran its first Olympic gold medal in 1956<sup>2</sup>. The football only took off internationally in the 1970s when Iran became the great regional power in relation to the western states; its football team won the Asian Nations Cup three times and participated in the World Cup for the first time in 1978.

The Islamic revolution (1978-1979) and the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988), put an end to this prosperous era for football. The high authorities of the new regime do not appreciate football which, for them, goes hand in hand with profusion of money, violence in the stadiums and incivilities. The football clubs are nationalized and the national championship in its previous form has been erased and replaced by provincial championships. It was only in 1989, with the end of the Iraq-Iran war and the nomination of Hashemi Rafsanjani as President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, that a national championship was reinstated. The decade 1990-2000 is one of a gradual recovery for football and for Iranian sport in general. The major signs of this revival are Iran's qualification for the 1998 World Cup and the scores achieved in this competition (including the victory over the United States); this qualification and these results coincide with the election of reformist Mohammad Khatami as President of the Republic. Other signs of change are that foreign coaches are called upon to lead the national team, which had not happened since the revolution and players are recruited into European clubs and, especially, into the prestigious *Bundesliga* ones.

But here is a more fundamental issue: in 2001 a professional championship (the Iran pro league) was created; until then players were employees of administrations or companies that supported the club. Moreover Iran qualified for the 2006 World Cup in Germany; it was the end of a great era in football history coinciding with Khatami's two presidential terms. The radical and populist Ahmadinejad then took over. During his second term, Iran did not participate in the 2010 World Cup. With the election of Hassan Rohani in June 2013, football seemed to - once again - be a barometer of Iran's international politics. At the same time, the *tim-e melli* qualified for the 2014 World Cup in Brazil where it got decent results. They still qualified for the 2018 World Cup, finishing first in their group ahead of South Korea. In Russia they defeated Morocco, drew with Portugal but were defeated by Spain, so they could not participate in the finals. Internationally, the Iranian team occupies an honorable place (ranking from 20th to 50th in the FIFA rankings each year). Since the birth

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of football in Iran, the country has experienced two authoritarian regimes: the Pahlavi monarchy and the Islamic Republic.

### **Institutions and actors under state control**

Under both regimes, presidents of the Iranian Football Federation were appointed after the government's agreement. Under the Pahlavi monarchy, the military had the upper hand on football; the presidents of the Federation were most often former sportsmen close to the government and members of the "1000 families" close to the regime; thus Kambiz Atabay, after being president of the Federation (from 1972 to 1979), became secretary of the former empress in New York. Under the Islamic Republic, most clubs were owned by government agencies or State enterprises; if the club becomes a symbol of all complaints it is quickly placed under the control of a parastatal structure; this was the case of the Traktorsazi club (Tabriz), the ultimate popular emblem of ethnic claims in Iranian Azerbaijan<sup>3</sup>; since 2011 Revolution guards and the province of Azerbaijan are own 80%.

Throughout the past 30 years, there have been numerous examples illustrating football dependence on State power. At the beginning of November 1997, following a disastrous defeat against Qatar - which seriously compromised their qualification for the 1998 World Cup - conservative deputies called for sanctions against the Republic's vice-president, Hashemi Taba, a moderate, in charge of physical education and - to them - guilty of not having ruled out sooner the disputed coach, Mayeli Kohan. The culprits, including the coach, were summoned by Parliament and required to explain. But even more significantly, after the disappointing performance of the national team during the 2006 World Cup in Germany (defeated by Mexico and Portugal, a draw with Angola), the reformist president of the Federation was dismissed by the government. This measure, symbolizing the subjugation of sport to political power (the brother of Ahmadinejad, then President of the Republic, played an active role in this forced resignation) initiated a backlash from FIFA, which suspended temporarily the Iranian Football Federation until a solution in accordance with the statutes of the International Federation was found (December 2006). This retreat of political power reflects the limits imposed by FIFA on the will of States.

State control is also imposed on coaches and players. We have already referred to Mayeli Kohan's dismissal. Let us also remember Ivic's fate; the latter, who coached the national team for the 1998 World Cup, was, under pressure from the Conservatives, first flanked by an Iranian assistant, then dismissed under astonishing conditions less than a month before the start of the competition's final phase. An Iranian coach replaced him; national pride - a cardinal value in

Iran - was safe! But even more players were subjected to control and called to order. This is because they themselves are not mere pawns manipulated by power. Their outfits and their look are severely controlled, including those of their wives if they play abroad. In October 2005, considering players' freedom in their appearance, the Iranian Federation enjoined them to respect "Islamic values", to wear neither clothes too body-tight, nor earrings, rings or necklaces and to keep up a well-groomed appearance by avoiding irregular beards, ponytails, long hair ... everything reminiscent of the Western look should be banned.

Their respect of religious customs is also subject to punctilious surveillance: Ali Karimi, nicknamed the "Maradona of Asia" was thus, in 2010, sacked by his club for failing to fast during the month of Ramadan. But their docility vis-à-vis the political power is also scrutinized and possibly sanctioned: Ahmadinejad thus contributed to remove Ali Da'i from his position as coach of the national team, the latter having refused to support him during the 2009 presidential campaign. Even more significantly, in June 2009, after the vote, in a match against South Korea, Ali Karimi and six other players wore a green bracelet in protest against Ahmadinejad's disputed reelection and in support of the green movement. On their return to Iran, these players were banned for life from their clubs by the Iranian authorities but were reinstated after a FIFA intervention. In reality authoritarian powers must take into account the principles of the international Federation that advocates, today more than ever before, the separation of sport and politics and tries to enshrine autonomy of sport as a whole.

However punctilious it may be, the control over male players is much less severe than that of female players. In a State where authorities are haunted by the concealment of the female body, practice of football by women is subject to rigorous supervision. Only very recently, in 2005, was created a national women's team, composed of the best players of the previous national team of *futsal*. When they play, the athletes are fully covered, including in the summer heat. They must wear a headscarf that does not show any of their hair, sweatpants well secured in their socks and a tunic covering their bodies to the bottom of their thighs. The problem of this regulatory dress arises acutely as soon as the team participates in a competition outside the country's borders. It was also at the heart of a controversy with FIFA that denied the participation of Iranian players under 15 years in the YOG (Youth Olympic Games) held in Singapore in August 2010. Actually an article of the rules of the international Federation stipulates that "the necessary basic equipment (of the player) can not include any sign equivalent to an affirmation of a political, religious or personal concern". A compromise was ultimately found between the presidents of FIFA and the Iranian Federation. "The players, the statement said, can wear a headgear on their hair but which should not go under the ears or cover the neck."

“FIFA has its pants down”, feminists commented<sup>4</sup>. However, FIFA reacted against the Iranian attitude in 2011 by disqualifying the Iranian team in the qualifying stages for the London Olympics. A scarf, and no longer a simple bandana, covered players’ ears and neck. But FIFA is not the organization that defines the laws and regulations of the game. This organization is the International Football Association Board. Sensitive to the pressure of the Prince of Jordan, Ali bin al - Hussein, himself vice - president of FIFA, the International Board suspended the ban on wearing the veil in July 2012 and confirmed definitively this suspension in March 2014. The argument given by the International Board is that the veil is "a cultural sign", which is not prohibited, unlike "political, religious or personal signs"!

The subjugation of football to state power - as are the limits of this subjugation - are also reflected in the names given to competitions, stadiums, clubs. During Shah’s regime the championship of the first division was called *Takht-e Jamshid* Cup, named after the Persian name of the old capital of the Achaemenid Empire to which the sovereign referred to in order to justify his regime; the second division championships took the name of *Parsagades* which was - according to the legend - the first capital of the Empire, before *Takht-e Jamshid*. To further testify to the centuries-long stance of its regime and to the Indo-European origin of the Iranian people, Shah had called the stadium built for the 1974 Asian Games "*Aryâmehr*" (Light of the Aryans). In this symbolic and lexical hold on the names of competitions, stadiums and clubs, the Islamic regime is equal to, or even exceeds, its predecessor. The first division championship was first called *Jâm-e Qods* (Jerusalem Cup) then, from 2008, *Jâm-e khalij-e Fârs* (Persian Gulf Cup); nothing offends more the Iranian national pride than the name " Arabo-Persian Gulf ": anyone who uses it gets jeers and protests at the highest level of the State and children are ordered to chant during demonstrations: *Jolf hamishe fârs* (The Gulf always Persian). As for the *Aryâmehr* stadium, it has been renamed *Âzâdi* (Liberty). The same lexical contrasts can be seen in the names given to the clubs before and after the revolution. *Tâj* (Crown) became *Esteghlâl* (Independence), *Pirouzi* (Victory) has replaced the former *Perspolis* (Greek name of the ancient capital of the Achaemenid Empire), a name officially recovered however since 2012, a sign of popular pressure and resistance.

International competitions are, in fact, opportunities to exalt patriotic sentiment and are fair barometers of diplomatic relations. On the occasion of Iran's victory over the United States at the 1998 World Cup, the "guide", Ali Khamene'i welcomes with satisfaction that "the oppressor once again experiences the bitter taste of defeat ". Ahmadinejad also used the mobilizing potential of football, even if he showed a strong penchant for wrestling. Meeting with the wrestlers in February 2006, he praised their sport describing it as “a symbol of loyalty, morality, chivalric spirit” (*javânmardi*) and promised them

the support of the government. A few days later, he donned the jersey of the national football team, paid tribute to the players, “as talented”, he said, “as the researchers in nuclear physics”!, then pleaded for a collective game and said that the team was “the gatekeeper flag of the independence of the country”. Ahmadinejad also used football to strengthen diplomatic relations. He participated with Morales, the president of Bolivia, in a futsal match in Tehran. The way football was treated by the different nations involved in the conflicts of the Middle East reflects the map of alliances and hostilities. Iran invited the Palestine team - which they beat 7-0 - and, in August 2017, removed two players (Shoja'i and Haj Safi) from the national team. They were members of the Greek club Panionios, who played in a match against Maccabi-Tel Aviv, the Israeli team. The two players did not participate in the first match in Israel but the mere participation in a match in Greece against an Israeli team was considered a major misconduct. However, the two players were reinstated in the national team at the request of the Portuguese coach, Carlos Queiroz, anxious for the composition of his team on the eve of the 2018 World Cup in Russia. This was a new illustration of the limits imposed on political motives by sport motives. The choice of the pitch's location for matches between foreign teams also bears witness to international tensions. Until 2001, matches between Iraq and Iran were disputed on neutral ground: in Kuwait City in 1989, in Doha in 1993, in Dubai in 1996, in Saïda in 2000. The ever closer ties with Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hossein resulted in the organization of matches between the two teams in Tehran, the situation remaining too volatile in Iraq, according to FIFA, to set up international matches on Iraqi soil. Strained relations with Saudi Arabia also resulted in disputes over the choice of playing field locations. The teams meet in Oman, Saudi Arabia refusing to send its representatives to Iran. Recently the federations of Iran and Qatar signed a memorandum to strengthen bilateral cooperation and "to counter the destructive actions of Saudi Arabia". This could not better illustrate the diplomatic instrumentalisation of football!

### **State control of the spectacle**

The stadiums - the places of collective effervescence, of "decontrolling of emotions" (N. Elias) - are closely overseen; in these spaces where there is freedom of speech, illustrated on the streets on the evenings of big matches, protests against the regime can be manifested more easily than elsewhere. The victory against Iraq and the defeat against Bahrain in October 2001 led to outbreaks of violence that echoed the slogan "Death to the mullahs! ". In July 2010, a violent fight took place in Tehran stadium during the match between *Traktorsazi* from Tabriz and a team from Tehran. The officials denounced a brawl between hooligans but, in fact, 35,000 supporters of the two teams competed against the *Basij* (volunteers dependent on Revolutionary Guards and

responsible for internal security) for three hours. Another example of these sportivo-political mobilizations: in June 2013 after the victory against South Korea, Iranians sang in the street "Ya Hossein! Mir Hossein" combining the names of the third imam and the rejected candidate in the 2009 presidential elections. To prevent these dissenting risks, the regime tried to impose order (the police watches) and conspicuously called for Islamic and revolutionary fervor during major games. In the 1990s, the big stadiums were decked with posters and inscriptions denouncing the United States and calling for Israel's destruction. Today, at least during the major games I attended in 2006-2008, a host asked the audience to chant "Death to America", to be inspired by the conduct of Hossein Fahmide, the young hero and martyr consecrated by Imam Khomeini, and to participate in the prayer that inaugurates the match. But these calls were hardly followed by supporters who supported their team rather than the government. They preferred to chant "Death to the opposing team" rather than "Death to America". This is another significant example of crowd resistance that does not bow to official slogans.

The authoritarianism was particularly apparent in the ban on women from attending men's football games and, more generally, men's competitions<sup>5</sup>.

The challenge of this ban has become a *Leitmotif* of women's demands and at every big match some women try to break into the stadium. This protest movement kicked off on the occasion of the return of the national team after their victory in Australia which allowed them to qualify for the World Cup in 1998: several thousand women (especially young women) invaded the Tehran stadium where the heroes were celebrated, while the media called for the "dear sisters" to stay at home to watch the event on television, which did not broadcast any image of these mutineers. "Aren't we part of this nation? We too want to celebrate. We are not ants," said these indociles. The problem of women's access to stadiums arose again for international matches, especially those attended by foreign women. Thus, let's consider just two examples among others<sup>6</sup>. In October 2004, 11 women tried to attend the Iranian match against Germany, but were turned away whilst German women could enter the stadium. "How are we different from them?" the rebels protested. On the occasion of the qualifying match against North Korea in June 2005 it seemed that a key step had been taken. A significant number of female footballers could watch the match under heavy police surveillance; they were placed between two rows of Korean supporters to avoid any promiscuity with Iranians. After that, several initiatives were taken to finally lift this prohibition, for example, the plan to reserve special stands for women. This idea was even taken up by Ahmadinejad (maybe out of opportunism) in April 2006. But there was immediately an outcry. Each time, the great ayatollahs and conservatives opposed the lifting of this prohibition.

Thus in 2006 Grand Ayatollah Lankarani promulgated a *fatvâ*, recalling the validity of this prohibition and the conservatives unanimously railed against Ahmadinejad's project. "Just as it is a sin for men to look at naked women, so it is not good from an Islamic point of view for women to look at the bare legs of men," said a 2006 MP opposed to any modifications, as is the Council of Guardians, responsible for ensuring compliance of the measures being considered with the Islamic Law. The presence of women in stadiums has thus become a major political issue that has even inspired filmmakers. In *Offside*, which won the "Silver Bear" award at the Berlin Film Festival in February 2006, but the broadcast of which is banned in Iran, Jafar Panahi, who was sentenced to six years in prison and given a 20 year prohibition from film making and was banned from leaving Iran (these measures have been lightened recently), depicts the story of a young girl who disguises herself as a boy to access the Azadi stadium.

Has the situation changed in recent years? President Rohani, elected in 2013, declared himself in favor of lifting the ban and in September 2017 people believed in the end of the ban: women were able to book tickets online to attend the Iran-Syria match. A website had been specially designed for booking tickets for women. But, *in extremis*, the Federation declared that it was a mistake, that the prohibition will remain and that tickets would be refunded. It was thought again that this ban could be lifted for the Tehran derby between *Esteghlâl* and *Perspolis*, which took place on the 1<sup>st</sup> of March 2018 in the presence of the President of FIFA; it was not the case, 35 women who tried to enter the stadium were arrested and the limits of the International Federation's abilities to intervene were measurable. Finally on June 20, the ban appeared to be lifted, as the women were allowed, by the government, to attend the Azadi stadium broadcast on a giant screen of the Iran-Spain World Cup match. One step seemed definitely to be made in the right direction. In the wake of the World Cup final, President Rohani reiterated his position to allow women to attend football matches. However, at the resumption of the national championship (end of July 2018), the situation seemed fixed and the *status quo ante* to prorogate<sup>7</sup>. How does one account for such a blockage?

In fact, the power of the President of the Republic is limited in Iran; the one who holds the reins of power is the "guide", Ali Khamene'i, and the holders of moral authority are the great ayatollah-s, the *marja'-e taqlid* (sources of imitation) to which refer believers to guide their behavior. In a statement published in the Official Gazette of the Islamic Republic on 21/01/1394 (10/4/2015), the guide stated that "this act (allowing women's access to stadiums) is prohibited and is an offense ". The *marja'-e taqlid*, consulted on this subject, adopted the same position in the advice (*esteftâ*) they gave during the same period. The reasons

given are of two kinds: on the one hand, the gaze of women "on the half-naked body of unknown men" is not lawful (*harâm*); on the other, "the prevailing atmosphere is not suitable for the presence of women" and this "mix" of both genders would be "the source of many moral and social problems". The prudish ethics in force also impose that televised broadcast of the group draw does not involve shocking images: at the end of 2013, as at the end of 2017, Iranians could not attend the televised retransmission of this draw: the, Brazilian and Russian, women presenters were judged indecent. It is also a habit of Iranian television to postpone for a minute the broadcasting of matches to be able to interrupt in time if an unannounced and non-compliant event occurs.

The second reason given by the *marja'-e taqlid* refers to the obsession with discipline, with moral order, with the sexual divide of space and with the prude etiquette advocated by the Islamic Republic. After victories, the demonstrations of joy and happiness in the streets also appear as threats to the decency that prescribes, in public spaces, a serious and dark appearance. Honking the horn or dancing in the street are seen as unbearable transgressions of imposed norms. Conservative authorities are offended by the vulgarity of the spectators who, like everywhere else, consider the stadium as one of the only spaces where one can say insults (*fohsh*) and swear words. There is, in fact, a singular contrast between the supporters' slogans (for instance *Shir-e samâvar dar kun-e dâvar*: "The tap of the samovar in the referee's ass") and inscriptions that appear on the edges of tribunes indicating that prayer is the key to paradise and that one should be inspired in the stadiums by 'Ali's example (the first imam of the Shiites) and his family. As such, and many others, the stadium is a scary place for the authorities so tenaciously attached to their puritanical ethics.

The authoritarianism of the regime is as visible in its management of the sport and its practitioners as in its control of the game and its spectators. These abuses of power must, however, reckon with the international regulations - more or less vigorously recalled by FIFA - as well as with the reactions of the actors, players and spectators, weary, for many of them, of a regime that has been overtaken by its own values and certainties. In the stands as on the pitch a tense game is being played between traditional models and aspirations to world standards

## Notes

1 On the history of football in Iran, see Chehabi, "The politics of football in Iran", Bromberger, "Le football en Iran".

2 On the holder of this first gold medal, Gholam Reza Takhti see Chehabi, "Sports and politics in Iran".

3 On this club and the claims for ethnic rights see Rashidi, "Tractor Sazi FC".

4 Sugier, « La FIFA se déculotte devant Téhéran ».

5 Hasanzadeh, "Iranian Women, Inside or Outside of the Stadium?"

6 For more details, see Bromberger, « Sport, football and masculine identity ».

7 This is the situation at the moment (August 2018) when I am writing this article. If the ban were lifted in the coming weeks or months, there would probably be a willingness not to lag behind Saudi Arabia, the regional enemy, which recently allowed women to attend football games.

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