

World War Cup: Fascism Comes to Football

Written by

Tuesday, 16 May 2006 10:47 - Last Updated Tuesday, 16 May 2006 10:47

World War Cup: Fascism Comes to Football

The Nation - Dave Zirin and John Cox - German and US politicians have seized on the tournament to intensify the saber rattling aimed at Tehran. Citing Iran's efforts to develop a nuclear program and the anti-Israel pronouncements of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, several leading politicians in both countries have called for the Iranian team to be banned from the World Cup. In this spirit of tolerance and peace, Berlin's liberal daily Der Tagesspiegel ran a cartoon in February that depicted Iranian soccer players as suicide bombers.

www.thenation.com

[Using Soccer to Kick Iran](#)

DAVE ZIRIN & JOHN COX

The Nation
May 16, 2006

The World Cup--the monthlong competition taking place throughout Germany beginning June 9--is by sheer numbers the most important sporting event on earth. Football--or soccer, as Americans insist on calling it--is by far the world's most popular sport, and the World Cup creates a near-united global audience. Approximately one in four human beings will view this year's final game. That means basically anyone who has access to a television will be watching--though probably fewer in the United States, where "soccer" is still viewed in some quarters as a plot to create a one-world government.

Politics cannot be separated from the World Cup any more than it can be from the Olympics. Sometimes this is for the best: For example, Africans throughout the continent exulted in Senegal's shocking upset of its former colonizer, France, in the first game of the 2002 Cup.

This year, however, German and US politicians have seized on the tournament to intensify the saber rattling aimed at Tehran. Citing Iran's efforts to develop a nuclear program and the anti-Israel pronouncements of [Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#), several leading politicians in both countries have [called for the Iranian team to be banned](#) from the World Cup. In this spirit of tolerance and peace, Berlin's liberal daily Der Tagesspiegel

World War Cup: Fascism Comes to Football

Written by

Tuesday, 16 May 2006 10:47 - Last Updated Tuesday, 16 May 2006 10:47

ran a cartoon in February that depicted Iranian soccer players as suicide bombers.

Now Germany's conservative Chancellor Angela Merkel has further stoked this sentiment by likening Iran's nuclear plans to the threat posed by the Nazis. Italian reform minister Roberto Calderoli of the anti-immigrant Northern League called on the international soccer federation (FIFA) to exclude Iran and other "rogue states," and in recent weeks British Conservatives--perhaps distraught over their own team's dwindling prospects, after an injury to their best player--have gotten in on the act.

Back in Germany, some Christian Democrats have further upped the ante by invoking the specter of Iranian terrorism at the games, asserting that Tehran will slip some suicide bombers disguised as regular fans into a game. Calls for a ban, or at least for a travel ban against the Iranian president, have intensified in Germany as the games approach. Leading Conservative and Social Democratic officials are now quoted almost daily decrying a possible visit by Ahmadinejad. And in early May, a German newspaper reported that officials of Germany, France and Britain are hoping to orchestrate a travel-ban scheme through the European Union that would [prevent high-ranking Iranian officials from attending](#) any of the games.

In the most recent gambit, on May 12 a group of European Union representatives presented a letter to FIFA demanding that Iran be evicted from the games. The hypocrisy of this quasi-extortion is overwhelming: Iran should be banned because its leaders indulge in belligerent rhetoric and attempt to develop a nuclear program, yet no one advocates the exclusion of the United States, even though it is engaged in two military occupations, in Iraq and Afghanistan, and President Bush has refused to rule out a nuclear strike on Iran.

Despite its drive to demonize and isolate Iran, the United States has been slower than its German counterparts to use soccer in this campaign, given the sport's relative obscurity here. But a few politicians have craftily picked up on it. On April 6, Senator John McCain, Mr. Maverick, introduced a resolution to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee advocating a World Cup ban on Iran--a resolution that is sure to go nowhere. To its credit, FIFA has rejected all of these demands, and seems unlikely to budge. But much of this anti-Iran campaign has less to do with the unrealistic goal of banning the top-level Middle Eastern team than with grooming public opinion for aggression.

Iran's blustery president seems less of a threat to Israel or to anyone else than to the rights and welfare of his own people. Middle East expert Juan Cole pointed out in a May 3 post on his blog

World War Cup: Fascism Comes to Football

Written by

Tuesday, 16 May 2006 10:47 - Last Updated Tuesday, 16 May 2006 10:47

that Ahmadinejad's overheated oratory is hardly the gravest threat to world peace.

Cole argues, "Ahmadinejad is a non-entity. The Iranian 'president' is mostly powerless. The commander of the armed forces is the Supreme Jurisprudent, Ali Khamenei [who, by the way, just reinstated a ban on women's attendance at soccer games that Ahmadinejad had reversed in April]. Worrying about Ahmadinejad's antics is like worrying that the US military will act on the orders of the secretary of the interior. Ahmadinejad cannot declare war on anyone, or mobilize a military. So it doesn't matter what speeches he gives. Moreover, Iran cannot fight Israel. It would be defeated in 72 hours, even if the US didn't come in, which it would.... What is really going on here is an old trick of the warmongers. Which is that you equate hurtful statements of your enemy with an actual military threat, and make a weak and vulnerable enemy look like a strong, menacing foe. Then no one can complain when you pounce on the enemy and reduce his country to flames and rubble."

The Iranian people are even more enthusiastic about soccer than most of the rest of the world. Iran even held a national day of celebration when its team qualified for the Cup, and Iranian soccer fans look forward to cheering their team on as it attempts to survive a difficult first round against Portugal and Mexico. Perhaps the Iranian team will have an opportunity to repeat the squad's upset of the United States in 1998. But this would be little consolation if the Cup is used as a platform to further threaten their nation with invasion or occupation.

"I would rather people built a clear wall between sport and politics," Iran's Croatian-born coach Branko Ivankovic has said. But the Iranian people are being reminded that, while soccer may be a beautiful game for them, it's little more than a political weapon for others.