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US imperialism and the FIFA corruption investigation

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After days of official hyperbole expressing heartfelt concern for the tarnished reputation of the “beautiful game”, the central aim of the United States in launching a criminal investigation into FIFA, world soccer’s ruling body, is all too clear.

On Wednesday, the FBI stated that its investigation now encompasses allegations of corruption, bribery, and vote-rigging related to FIFA awarding the 2018 and 2022 World Cups to Russia and Qatar. This is a political move against the regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin and is conceived of as a vital propaganda adjunct of the ongoing US-led NATO encirclement of Russia.

The events leading up to the May 27 arrest of nine top FIFA officials and five corporate executives by the US Department of Justice on a 47-count indictment under the RICO Act, on charges including racketeering, wire fraud and money laundering, are extraordinary. They point to the fact that no aspect of life is exempt from the impact of mounting economic, political and military antagonisms—and no limit to what Washington is prepared to do to impose its will.

Soccer is hardly a major sporting institution in the US, and the money allegedly involved—\$150 million over a 24 year period—is, at least in comparison to the daily corruption of the US financial system, chicken feed. Yet the FBI has devoted massive resources and stretched its authority far beyond what can be legally justified.

According to official accounts, an investigation into FIFA was first launched in 2009, but this initially focused on corruption allegations emerging in the aftermath of the collapse of FIFA's marketing partner International Sports Leisure and involved the association football bodies CONMEBOL (South America) and CONCACAF (Caribbean, Central and North America). Most of those arrested last month in Switzerland were also associated with the two bodies, accused of taking bribes paid prior to the 1998 and 2010 World Cups.

However, the arrests at the Baur au Lac hotel in Switzerland were not the prize the FBI was seeking. Indeed, it worked together with Swiss authorities, who had launched a nominally separate criminal investigation into how, in 2010, FIFA awarded the 2018 and 2022 World Cups. Those arrested were in Switzerland to attend the 65th FIFA Congress on May 29, at which Sepp Blatter, the figure most closely associated with the Moscow and Qatar decisions, was to be re-elected for a fifth time.

The campaign against Blatter and the holding of the World Cup in Russia had begun prior to the arrests. On May 26, one day before the raid in Switzerland, Senator Robert Menendez, who in April was indicted on federal corruption charges, and Senator John McCain, jointly authored a letter to FIFA urging that Blatter be removed over his "continued support for Russia hosting the 2018 FIFA World Cup—despite Russia's ongoing violations of Ukraine's territorial integrity and other challenges to the post-WWII security architecture."

This campaign was intensified after the FBI action. In the UK, Prince William, leaders of the Football Association, Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, and the frontrunner for the post of new Labour Party leader, Andy Burnham, all came out against Blatter and/or in opposition to Moscow and Qatar's hosting of the World Cup.

The crosshairs were turned increasingly on Blatter himself. On June 1, the *New York Times* reported that a hitherto anonymous "high-ranking FIFA official" implicated in an alleged \$10 million bribe had been identified as Blatter's top lieutenant, FIFA Secretary General Jérôme Valcke.

Sony, Emirates, Castrol, Continental and Johnson & Johnson all withdrew as sponsors of FIFA.

Then, on June 2, Blatter announced that he would resign as FIFA president in December. But this did not stop the FBI from stating that he was also under investigation, while an anonymous source told Reuters that the investigation had widened to include the bidding processes for the 2018 and 2022 tournaments.

On cue, UK Culture Secretary John Whittingdale told parliament that England was potentially ready to host the 2022 World Cup. Linking this proposal to Russia, he noted, "we have the facilities in this country and of course we did mount a very impressive, if unsuccessful, bid to host the 2018 World Cup."

The Putin regime in Moscow understands very well that it, and not Qatar, is the main target for the US operation against FIFA, with Putin condemning "yet another blatant attempt [by the United States] to extend its jurisdiction to other states."

Russian officials have said that Blatter's resignation will have no impact on their preparations to host the cup, with Deputy Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich telling the *Guardian*, "Any political interference into football affairs is illegal."

Illegal or not, it would be extraordinarily naive to assume that the 2018 tournament will proceed without the most determined efforts by the US to prevent it.

Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko has already written that Blatter's resignation gives hope that "certain corruption-motivated decisions" by FIFA will be cancelled.

In Britain, on June 1, the Conservatives and Labour both raised the possibility of staging "alternative" World Cups in 2018 and 2022, revealing that the FA is discussing this plan with UEFA, the European soccer federation. UEFA met yesterday in Berlin and was, at least prior to Blatter's resignation, ready to discuss splitting from FIFA and holding a breakaway tournament in 2018.

Given Blatter's resignation, this "nuclear option" may not be necessary, as FIFA may yet abandon plans to host the tournament in Moscow. An article in the *Daily Telegraph* June 4 suggested that, should this occur, "The strongest contender is rumoured to be the US. ..."

Throughout these events, there has been wall-to-wall supportive press coverage of the US moves—with scarcely any questioning of its claim to be intent on clearing the Augean stables of FIFA. No major journalists have raised certain obvious questions: who are US officials to denounce corruption at FIFA, given the corruption that plagues US sports and the multi-trillion dollar scandals involving the American financial system, for which no one has been held accountable? Under what authority does the American ruling class arrogate the right to arrest individuals that did not act within its jurisdiction or in its country?

The obvious geopolitical motivations behind US prosecutors' sudden interest in FIFA corruption are hardly broached. A rare exception was Natalie Nougayrède, who wrote in the *Guardian* that "the notion of a multipolar world has taken a hit. ... It is a stark and very public reversal of the familiar narrative of America losing its clout in global affairs. All of a sudden, talk of a post-American world seems less convincing."

The implications are far wider than Nougayrède might assume. The US is prepared to bully, intimidate and to dispense with established legal norms in order to score a propaganda victory and further isolate Moscow. But this is nothing compared with the criminality with which Washington conducts itself in other more vital spheres—spying on the world's people, illegal rendition, torture, drone strikes, the launching of illegal wars and even contemplating war against the nuclear powers of Russia and China that threaten the world with an unimaginable catastrophe.