

Sportswashing and the 2026 FIFA World Cup: The Politics of World Cup Enjoyment

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Sportswashing and the 2026 FIFA World Cup: The Politics of World Cup Enjoyment

The 2026 FIFA World Cup arrives as the largest edition in the tournament's history. Comprising 48 teams and 104 matches, the three host nations, including the United States, Mexico, and Canada will, together, present a continental celebration of soccer's expanding global reach (FIFA.com, 2026). FIFA's own language leans heavily on the promise that football can unite the world. This is familiar mega-event rhetoric, with the 2026 tournament, and previous World Cups, being sold as a temporary suspension of national and international division, indeed, a shared festival in which politics recedes behind the ball. Yet, the more insistently FIFA repeats this claim, the more difficult it becomes to ignore how much political work the tournament is already doing.

Sportswashing is often treated as a problem that belongs elsewhere. Usually, Qatar, Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia, where authoritarian regimes use sport to soften the visibility of repression. The 2026 World Cup unsettles this geography. If sportswashing names the use of sport to recast a political actor, institution, or nation in a more favorable light, then it cannot simply be reserved for non-Western states. The concept becomes analytically useful precisely when it can also be turned toward democratic hosts, liberal institutions, and the political economies that make mega-events possible.

This matters because the American staging of the tournament takes place in a political context in which Donald Trump has been unusually close to FIFA and its president, Gianni Infantino. The most symbolic moment came at the World Cup draw, when Trump was awarded FIFA's newly created, 'Peace Prize'. FIFA described the award as recognition for actions that unite people, while critics questioned both the choice and the opaque process by which it was made. The significance here was not simply that a controversial political leader appeared at a sporting event, it was that FIFA sought to use the World Cup as an image of international legitimacy (Graham and Beaumont, 2025).

This is where sportswashing becomes more subtle than propaganda. It rarely asks audiences to believe a wholly invented story. Instead, it works more effectively by inviting them to enjoy the spectacle while knowing, perfectly well, that the spectacle is politically compromised. In psychoanalytic terms, this reflects a form of fetishistic disavowal, best expressed as, 'I know very well, but all the same' (Black, et al., 2024). In the case of football, and the FIFA World Cup, we know that football is saturated with money, nationalism, surveillance, inequality, and corporate extraction, we also know that the tournament is used by political leaders to stage their nation's competence, encourage national unity, and foster a sense of prestige and belonging on the global stage. Yet, when the whistle blows, such knowledge is typically held at a certain distance... how else is one to enjoy the football on display?

Certainly, this does not suggest that fans are naïve or morally deficient. The attraction of the World Cup is real. It carries memories, rituals, family histories, national attachments, tactical pleasures, and moments of collective surprise that are, for many, moments which are typically shared with friends and family, whether at the games themselves or watching live at home, or the local pub or sports bar. Indeed, these are not trivial matters which make

sport insignificant. Instead, sportswashing is powerful because it attaches itself to what people genuinely enjoy. If football did not matter, then it would have little value as a political resource, and it is for this reason that the same attachment which makes the game meaningful also makes it available for ideological manipulation. Fans are asked to preserve the purity of the event by disavowing the political structures that organize it.

A critical account of 2026 should therefore resist two easy conclusions. The first is the comforting claim that football and politics can be separated. They cannot. The second is the equally comforting claim that, because the tournament is politically compromised, the only ethical response is withdrawal (Boykoff, 2026). Boycott may be meaningful in some contexts, but it cannot exhaust the politics of spectatorship. The harder task is to remain with the contradiction. Indeed, to watch, without our enjoyment becoming an alibi for forgetting (or ignoring).

Importantly, this requires asking different questions during the tournament. Who benefits from such images of togetherness? Which political figures are granted soft-focus legitimacy through football's emotional charge? Which social problems are made to appear less urgent because a stadium is full (or not), a flag is waving, or a host city is beautifully presented on television? How does FIFA's rhetoric of unity coexist with high prices, immigration controls, policing, and the marginalization of those for whom mega-events often mean disruption rather than celebration?

A brief answer to the above questions is not to purify the World Cup. That fantasy has always served FIFA well. Instead, the task is to refuse the comfort of knowing better while carrying on as though our knowledge changes nothing. The 2026 World Cup will produce extraordinary football. It will also produce political images, commercial opportunities, and narratives of national renewal. A critical response should hold these together. Sportswashing succeeds when the game gives us permission to forget what we already know.

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