

## Blatter faces “once in a lifetime opportunity”

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As the end of another year draws close, so does FIFA’s reform process, which will conclude in May 2013 at its annual congress in Mauritius. With it, the organisation hopes to bring to an end the most difficult chapter in its 108 year history. President Sepp Blatter has, to paraphrase his words, been steering the ship through the storm. Now his challenge is to fix the damage.

The numerous allegations of corruption against FIFA continue to serve as sticks to beat the organisation and its leadership with. Undercover stings by the British tabloid press uncovering a willingness by members of the executive committee to sell their votes, the cash-for-votes scandal of the last Presidential election and numerous allegations relating to the bid processes for the 2018 and 2022 World Cups are the most prominent of the recent scandals to have afflicted FIFA.

On top of those was the release of the ISL files earlier this year, which documented bribes paid to former FIFA President João Havelange and his ex son-in-law Ricard Teixeira, the Brazilian football chief who was also in charge of organising the World Cup in 2014 until his departure from the football scene in March.

All of these issues and more could form part of the investigations being carried out by FIFA’s new ethics committee lead prosecutor Michael J. Garcia. FIFA last year also set up The Independent Governance Committee (IGC), chaired by Swiss professor Mark Pieth, to recommend reforms aimed at bringing lasting change to the organisation.

### Positive signs

Hershman, a corporate and governmental compliance expert with the Fairfax Group, told Play the Game that the signs so far have been encouraging since they outlined recommendations earlier this year: “There have been some major changes made in the governance procedures at FIFA, including the appointment of independent heads of the ethics committee and investigatory chamber,” he explains. “This is the first time I am aware of in the history of FIFA that independent parties have been brought in to head up such critical functions.”

Hershman cautions, as has the IGC more generally, that past corruption allegations have not been sufficiently investigated by FIFA, but is confident they will accept the recommendation to limit the terms of members of the executive committee, as well as of the President himself. With the new system of selecting World Cup hosts, which will involve every member nation rather than just those represented on the executive

committee, Hershman believes “we will see a greater level of confidence in the future when these host countries are selected.”

A whole host of issues are up for discussion and will form part of the process, such as marketing rights for World Cups and the way in which the host of these tournaments is decided in the first place. A reorganised ethics committee, and the addition of a compliance function to FIFA’s audit committee are some of the steps taken already, but others will be harder to effect. The IGC needs public support, and Pieth made a plea for external pressure to keep the reform process going during its remaining months at Play the Game’s keynote session at the international EASM conference in Denmark in September.

### **‘Legacy is critical to Blatter’**

Perhaps surprisingly to the average football fan, Blatter is said to be taking these reforms seriously (for now at least) by members of the IGC, Hershman included. “I have had personal discussions with him – the entire IGC has met with him. Blatter is facing a once in a lifetime opportunity. His credibility has been damaged. The confidence level in his leadership is low. He has the opportunity here to leave behind a legacy of reform,” Hershman explains.

“So far in the IGC’s dealings with Mr Blatter we have seen nothing but a strong commitment to ensure that governance and compliance of this organisation changes. Say what you want about Mr Blatter, but I have come to know this – he is a very intelligent man, and he is a man who cares a lot about the sport. As intelligent as he is he understands that reforming FIFA, the perception of reform...is less credible with him at the helm.”

That is a view echoed by another member of the IGC, Britain’s former Attorney General Lord Goldsmith, who says that Blatter has shown a commitment to reform, and Hershman underlines that “his legacy is critical to him” as cause for optimism.

Blatter knows that his name will forever be linked with scandals, but through the reform process he can at least restore some credibility. In Hershman’s words “to show that through the adversity he was able to make changes in the reform process.”

Given all of the mud that has been thrown at FIFA over the years, and particularly recently, it is remarkable how Blatter has managed to emerge through the torrent of scandals. His image may be permanently tainted, but his survival and political instincts show no sign of abating in what is now his fourth and final term (although some of his recent comments betray a possible run for a fifth).

The list of former allies Blatter has turned on in pursuit of political survival underlines that. Havelange and Teixeira may already have left, but his sudden support for the release of the ISL files, after years of FIFA opposition to their release, marked a decisive break from the Brazilian duo, the latter of whom lost his posts earlier this year in no small part due to Blatter’s role in isolating him politically. Jack Warner and

Mohamed bin Hammam, key Blatter henchmen of past years, were both forced out of FIFA in the cash-for-votes scandal that marred the build up to the 2011 Presidential election. But however far Blatter distances himself from these former allies, he cannot escape from the past. He has himself admitted that he is person 'P1' identified in the ISL files as knowing of the bribes being taken by Havelange and Teixeira.

### **'Change is coming to FIFA'**

While Blatter publicly supports reform, inside FIFA old habits die hard. Issa Hayatou recently attempted to limit challenges to his position as head of the Confederation of African Football (CAF) to members of the organisation's executive committee. Nicolas Leoz has been appointed 'President for Life' by the South American confederation CONMEBOL.

Pieth himself has spoken of the pressures from within from vested interests, although Blatter has admonished him for those comments since. But Hershman echoes Pieth's comments. "There are people on the executive committee, and I am not in the position to name any names...from different cultures and backgrounds. Some have been there for a very long time, for some of them change does not come easily." Yet the American insists that while resistance exists, FIFA "has no choice" but to embrace change.

"The resistance while it may be there is being overcome. Here is the issue – there is too much at stake. The FIFA family includes sponsors, players, coaches, owners, administrators, referees and others, employees and family members of employees. All of these people want to see change.

"The institution cannot resist this sort of tidal wave of feeling towards change – it is impossible for them to withstand regardless of who is resisting these changes. This organisation has no choice but to become more transparent and accountable to the stakeholders."

On this point Hershman is particularly clear. "Some may go kicking and screaming, but it is going to happen," he states, adding "transparency and accountability is coming to this organisation." Hershman points out that it is important to remain sceptical until the changes and reforms have been made, yet his confidence is certainly encouraging for those wanting FIFA to embrace reform. Is such confidence well placed? In little over six months' time, we will know.

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