

Should Countries with Questionable Human Rights Records Host International Sports Competitions?



Human Rights According to Whom?

»» by Barbara Keys

Working to keep the Olympic Games from abetting brutality and repression is a worthy goal. The Games buy host countries spectacular levels of international approbation—enough sometimes to have measurable effects on international politics. For this reason, members of the international community have an interest in pressuring the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to award the Games to host countries that broadly abide by international norms.

But formalizing human rights standards in any explicit way would backfire. Adopting human rights criteria in judging potential hosts would mean either that the IOC requires applicants to meet explicit minimum criteria or that it judges human rights records alongside other elements of a bid. In the first case, articulating minimum standards would be a daunting task in light of the multiplicity of rights and their malleable meanings. How would rights be ranked and interpreted, how would adherence be measured, and how would cut-off points be determined? Making a “good” human rights record a precondition for bidders would inevitably involve judgments that appeared arbitrary and capricious, muddying the moral clarity that human rights standards should bring. And yet if there are no hard standards—if human

rights records are merely one fuzzy tool for evaluating a bid application, alongside the quality of swimming pools, the capacity of subways, and the number of three-star hotel rooms—rights are trivialized.

The IOC has of late avoided the kind of corruption scandal currently engulfing

soccer’s Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), but both are unelected, undemocratic, unaccountable organizations with scant moral credibility. Their members lack the standing and the expertise to adjudicate on human rights. Asking entertainment organizers to make consequential judgments about one of the most freighted issues of our time would hurt rather than help the cause of human rights.

Barbara Keys is an associate professor of history at the University of Melbourne. She is the author of Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s (2014) and editor of a forthcoming volume on the moral claims of international sports events.



Fairer, Greener, Cheaper: A New Olympic Motto for the 21st Century?

»» by Antoine Duval

Two years ago, just after the Sochi Olympics 2014, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) was in a deep confidence crisis. Not unlike FIFA today, it was faced with a wave of popular distrust. People were blaming the organization for the environmental damages and the many human rights violations recorded in Sochi. At first, the IOC tried to downplay its responsibility, insisting that hosts-states are sovereign and that the local committee complied with existing national laws. These excuses are often used by International Sports Governing Bodies (ISGBs) when

they are faced with criticisms regarding the human rights violations linked to the events they are organizing. Yet, in practice, ISGBs do not hesitate to require legal changes to national laws when their economic interests are at stake. They do not shy away from making the organization of an event conditional upon specific investments in infrastructure or the introduction of rules protecting their intellectual property rights. The same logic of conditionality should (and could) be applied as far as human rights and environmental sustainability are concerned. At least the private contracts

and administrative acts engaged into in the context of the organization of an event should abide with minimum standards. For example:

- Enforcement of minimum labor rights (based on ILO standards) for the workers involved on the many building sites tied to a mega event;
- Freedom of speech during the event (at least on the premises);
- Minimum environmental standards applied to the building sites of the event, etc.

These conditions should be enshrined in the host city contracts and the compliance of the local organizer

assessed by an independent monitoring body. Appropriate sanctions should be included to deter the local organizers from disregarding their original commitments. In this regard, the recently adopted Agenda 2020 of the IOC goes in the right direction, though its implementation will need to be closely scrutinized. It is the living proof that ISGBs could be a positive force to further human rights through sports, if only they would dare to do so.

Antoine Duval is Senior Researcher in European and International Sports Law at the Asser Institute in The Hague.

mit serious human rights violations in the very process of preparing for the games themselves. For example, China forcibly displaced some one million people in order to prepare facilities for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. Brazil displaced many thousands in order to build new stadiums for the 2014 World Cup. Even if it is wrong to boycott in protest of “unrelated” human rights violations, the international sports community should not tolerate abuses that are an integral part of the sports event itself.

Liberal democracies should indeed boycott international sports events held by oppressive governments or involving oppression in the process of holding the events themselves. Better still, they should use their clout in bodies such as the International Olympic Committee to prevent such governments from being designated as hosts in the first place; that way, we can avoid painful trade-offs between defending human rights and giving athletes a chance to compete in events many have spent a lifetime preparing for.

But, in applying such policies, we should strive for consistency. While there was considerable support for boycotting Russia in 2014, few called for a boycott of the 2008 Olympic Games in China, a nation ruled by a regime with an even worse human rights record. Even fewer did so in the case of Brazil in 2014. Our principled opposition to oppression should not vary based on the identities of the oppressor or the oppressed. We should not allow the Olympics to become a propaganda show for brutal regimes of either the right or the left; still less should we tolerate events that involve the forcible displacement of thousands of people in order to build sports stadiums.

Ilya Somin is a professor of law at George Mason University. He is the author of Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government Is Smarter (Stanford University Press, 2nd ed. 2016).



Sometimes Boycotting Is the Right Thing

»»» by Ilya Somin

For decades, people of goodwill have debated whether liberal democracies should boycott Olympic Games and other sports events held under the auspices of repressive governments. Apartheid South Africa was the target of a long-standing sports boycott that denied it the right to even participate in most international sports events, much less host them. Sixty-two nations, including the United States, boycotted the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow, in protest of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. More recently, human rights activists called for a boycott of the 2014 Winter Olympics, held in Sochi, Russia, in protest of the Russian government’s oppression of gays and lesbians.

The purpose of such boycotts is to incentivize oppressive governments to change their ways. Many such regimes care about their image and do not want to be sports pariahs. At least at the margin,

boycotts can improve their behavior, as they may have done by contributing to the demise of apartheid.

The standard argument against boycotts is the traditional idea that international sports events should not be kept free of politics. The problem with this theory is that the Olympics and other similar events are virtually always used as propaganda tools by host governments, as happened with Nazi Germany in 1936, the USSR in 1980, and Vladimir Putin’s regime in 2014. For this reason, it is nearly impossible to make them genuinely politically neutral. The only realistic options are either to allow repressive regimes to use the Games to burnish their public image, keep them from hosting in the first place, or forestall their propaganda by means of a boycott that undercuts the Games’ public relations benefits for the hosts.

Moreover, some governments com-