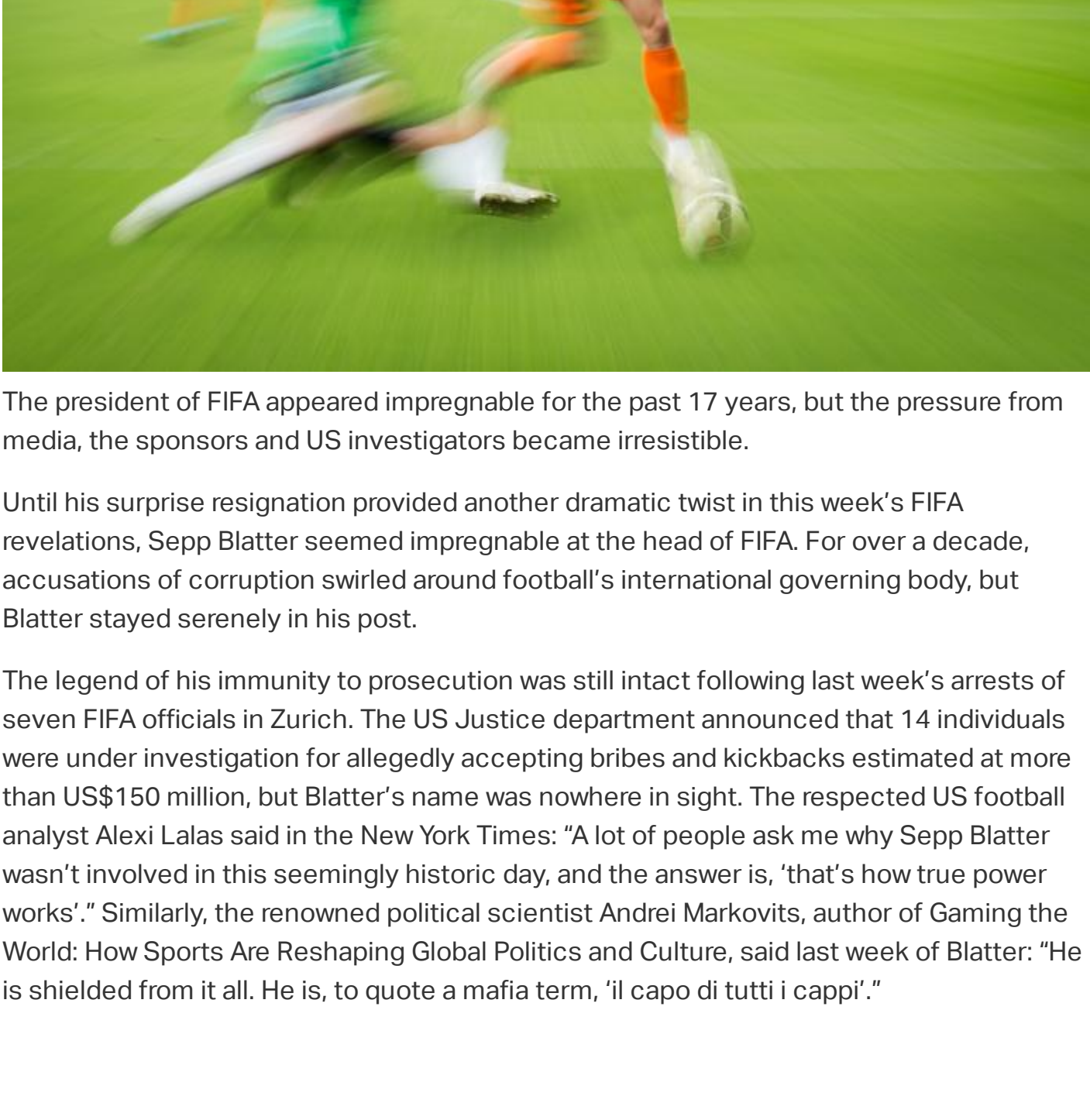


Why Sepp Blatter Fell on His Sword

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The president of FIFA appeared impregnable for the past 17 years, but the pressure from media, the sponsors and US investigators became irresistible.

Until his surprise resignation provided another dramatic twist in this week's FIFA revelations, Sepp Blatter seemed impregnable at the head of FIFA. For over a decade, accusations of corruption swirled around football's international governing body, but Blatter stayed serenely in his post.

The legend of his immunity to prosecution was still intact following last week's arrests of seven FIFA officials in Zurich. The US Justice department announced that 14 individuals were under investigation for allegedly accepting bribes and kickbacks estimated at more than US\$150 million, but Blatter's name was nowhere in sight. The respected US football analyst Alexi Lalas said in the New York Times: "A lot of people ask me why Sepp Blatter wasn't involved in this seemingly historic day, and the answer is, 'that's how true power works'." Similarly, the renowned political scientist Andrei Markovits, author of *Gaming the World: How Sports Are Reshaping Global Politics and Culture*, said last week of Blatter: "He is shielded from it all. He is, to quote a mafia term, 'il capo di tutti i cappi'."

However, something has changed in the past few days to transform the mindset of the 79-year-old Swiss national who has ruled over the FIFA oligarchy like a Pope with absolute power for the past 17 years. Following the arrests in Zurich on Wednesday, May 27, Blatter refused to pull out of the imminent election for the presidency of FIFA and was re-elected two days later by 133 votes to Prince Ali Bin al-Hussein's 73.

At the time, he responded incredulously to calls for his resignation: "Why would I step down? That would mean I recognise that I did wrong." However, just four days later, on Tuesday, June 2, his tone was more contrite and he looked a broken man during his resignation speech to journalists at FIFA's Headquarters in Zurich. "While I have a mandate from the membership of FIFA, I do not feel that I have a mandate from the entire world of football - the fans, the players, the clubs, the people who live, breathe and love football...", he said.

So what undermined Blatter's sense of impunity in the few days between his re-election and his resignation? What caused him to desert his Ivory Tower after 17 years? One possibility is that Blatter has shrugged off the claims of investigative reporters and law enforcement agencies in the past because he knew they could not get to him. Nevertheless, the full weight of the American FBI represented a completely new level of scrutiny that piled insurmountable pressure on him.

The arrests of two vice-presidents, as well as the pressure on Blatter's right-hand man, his powerful secretary general Jérôme Valcke, meant the investigation was moving ever closer to the "capo di tutti i cappi". The mounting evidence against Valcke was especially embarrassing for Blatter. The FBI claims that Valcke was aware of a US\$10million payment from South African officials to Jack Warner, the suspended former president of CONCACAF, the North American football federation. The FBI described it as a "bribe" aimed at gaining support for the South Africa's bid to host the 2010 World Cup.

Despite his resignation, political scientist Andrei Markovits says Blatter may still escape prosecution. "It's hard to nail the top guy when you go after a Mafia family, which is effectively what they've done," he said. "For Blatter to fall some of the guys who've been arrested would have to have the goods on him and start turning into Mafia informants. If the FBI is handed a 'smoking gun' they could get him.

"But I think it's very possible that Blatter wasn't directly involved in the corruption and didn't take a cent. I'm sure he knew everything about the corruption of Jack Warner and the US FIFA executive Chuck Blazer, but it would be hard to nail him in the courts of law for that, as opposed to the court of public opinion."

The final push for Blatter may well have come from FIFA's corporate sponsors, including Visa, Coca-Cola and McDonald's, all of whom welcomed his resignation. They were concerned at the global humiliation of FIFA in the media. Even in the US, which has never been a land of football fanatics, the arrests in Zurich made five-column headlines on page one of the New York Times.

Blatter secured his power base at the head of FIFA's oligarchy for so long through a system of patronage. Each of FIFA's 209 member nations gets one vote for president, which means countries like Botswana, and Trinidad and Tobago, have as much say in who runs the organisation as world champions Germany, or England. Although democratic, the system has allowed FIFA to buy votes through bestowing favours on poorer nations with corruptible officials. Given how much money FIFA has at its disposal to dole out to impoverished countries in need of new soccer facilities, the system entrenched Blatter's power.

However, there is another equally important reason for FIFA's long immunity from prosecution, according to Markovits. He says that FIFA's control of the international game allows it to control "the most important narrative of footballs". "In theory, UEFA wouldn't need FIFA if it broke away and created its own international tournament. Europe is the heart of the game and it is the source of the money. The English Premiership does not need FIFA either. It could break away and FIFA could do nothing to stop it.

"But FIFA has been able to stop this happening because every player wants to play for his country in the FIFA world cup. When Eric Cantona refused to play for France, he was vilified for his moral transgression. Americans find it hard to understand this because US sport is domestic and when the US plays in the World Baseball Cup, no one cares, whereas Lionel Messi can never be rated as highly as Diego Maradona can until he wins a World Cup. This power over football's international narrative means FIFA could excommunicate anyone not playing in a FIFA-sanctioned league and prevent them playing 'association football'. They would effectively be outlawed from the international game."

However, Markovits says UEFA could wrest power away from FIFA if its constituent nations acted together. No nation would take the decision to boycott a world cup alone and it has looked unlikely in the past that everyone would agree. Spain and France even backed Blatter in the recent election. However, the events of the past few days have caused UEFA officials to consider the "nuclear" option of setting up a rival world cup in 2018, when the tournament is scheduled to take place in Russia.

The plan came from Allan Hansen, 66, a retired Danish detective who sits on UEFA's executive committee. His idea is to invite only European sides and the strongest South American teams. Such a move would end FIFA's legitimacy as the international governing body because none of the world's strongest teams would be playing in their world cup. Sponsorship and broadcasting deals would collapse and money would dry up. "For a while there might be two rival jurisdictions like in boxing, but it would become clear where the weight is and it wouldn't last long," said Markovits.

For now, US investigators are in control of the narrative of football, a profound irony given the marginal part the US plays in the world game. Nevertheless, Markovits says this explains the dynamism of the US investigations into FIFA. The US does not care enough about football to worry about disturbing the world order. "The US is Mr Big in everything except football and that perhaps holds the key to. It's a case of the periphery striking the core," Markovits said.

The decision to strike was taken by the new US Attorney General, Loretta Lynch, who has been in the post for just a few weeks. The charges against FIFA executives were the latest step in a lengthy investigation she began whilst US Attorney for the Eastern District of New York. As a federal prosecutor, Lynch brought convictions against the mafia, terrorists, public officials, gang members and shady bankers. President Obama said she "might be the only lawyer in America who battles mobsters and drug lords and terrorists, and still has the reputation for being a charming 'people person'." Sepp Blatter may be somewhat less charmed by Lynch's personal qualities.

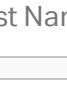
Lynch took the radical step of using the RICO legislation (Racketeer Influenced And Corrupt Organizations Act of 1970) which was designed to prosecute crime syndicates. RICO can be used to convict criminals outside the US if the law proves that a criminal organisation has been at work. What this effectively means is that the US Government is claiming that FIFA is a Mafia organisation. The same claim is levelled at CONCACAF, the North American football federation that has its headquarters in Miami.

"It was basically like breaking the Bonanno mafia family in New York. They invoked racketeering laws and went after a couple of guys, including the US FIFA executive Chuck Blazer," said Markovits. "They turned him into a supergrass, equipped him with electronic equipment and sent him to the London Olympics to record all kinds of conversations between FIFA officials. It's a classic anti-Mafia strategy."

Now that the investigation is underway and Blatter has quit, a new election for president will take place, although Blatter will remain in the position for the next few months. The election of a new leader may call into question the decision to allocate the world cups of 2018 and 2022 to Russia and Qatar respectively.

"To nail Russia they would need another in flagrante smoking gun to prove corruption. I actually think Russia is totally safe and can do this even if they are corrupt," said Markovits. "Qatar is different. Its nuts to give the world cup to a country the size of Connecticut. They will have to transform the whole place into football pitches. It will also be necessary to move the tournament to winter otherwise; the players will fry to death in 50-degree heat. There will now be a lot of pressure on FIFA to change this absurd and unaccountable decision."

See also: [FIFA Arrests Put Spotlight on Football Corruption](#)



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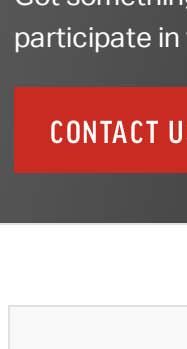
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