

Fifa: Football's future hinges on polls despite uncertainty over candidates

Soccer. Gianni Infantino and Sheikh Salman are favourites to become president although doubts persist they represent a clean break from the Sepp Blatter era

AGENCIES

LONDON. The curious alliance of US lawyers, public affairs advisers and Fifa insiders who have been attempting to keep the show on the road while all else falls around them have one key obsession as they approach a crucial week in its battle to avoid total collapse. It is this: to maintain Fifa's so-called victim status in the eyes of the US Department of Justice and the Swiss prosecutors who have brought the organisation to its knees.

If wide-ranging, but to many still unsatisfactory, reforms are not voted through next week or it fails to continue to consistently keep up the supply of evidence from inside Fifa HQ, then there are fears that status could change and prompt the end game of complete institutional collapse.

This, then, is the stark warning that will be delivered to the 209 Fifa members (207 of whom can vote as things stand) before a week when they will vote on those reforms and decide the identity of their third president in 42 years: change or die. It is not altogether clear that they have got the message.

Rewind to May at Zurich's Hallenstadion, the same cavernous conference hall that will host this week's special Congress, and a victorious Sepp Blatter could be seen mingling to the soundtrack of an oompah band. It proved to be a pyrrhic victory, with the now banned Blatter forced to promise to stand down days later when the scale and ramifications of the full frontal assault on the culture and practices of Fifa and its regional confederations became clear even to him.

So much has changed since May, with many of the biggest beasts in Fifa's jungle forced to leave the scene. Yet much stays the same, in the familiar, depressing feeling that football knows best. The very words themselves – reform, transparency, independence – have been debased by Blatter's tenure.

Fifa has produced a jaunty film to explain the package of reforms that its members will vote on this Friday. There's also a PowerPoint presentation that concludes, correctly, that "the future of Fifa and football hangs in the balance".

The package of reforms – arrived at following a convoluted and mildly chaotic process driven by a combination of the former International Olympic Committee executive François Carrard, the audit and compliance committee chairman, Domenico Scala, and the very confederations that got Fifa into this mess – are all sensible enough. They include a requirement that key committees – in-



Caf boss Issa Hayatou (left) with Fifa Presidential candidate Sheikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al-Khalifa in Kigali last month. PHOTO BY AFP

cluding the finance, development and governance committees – consist of 50% independent members. The audit and compliance committee will become, in theory, entirely independent. Crucially, the executive committee will be replaced by a Fifa council that will set the strategic direction of the organisation.

Committees to be reduced

Overseen by a president with diminished power, that strategy will be enacted by an operational board of Fifa executives who will be responsible for commercial deals – hopefully removing the toxic mix of the political, commercial and allegedly criminal that characterised the past four decades.

The number of committees will be drastically reduced and those sitting on them will be required to have rel-

evant experience. All this, so the pitch goes, will end the days when Julio Grondona and the under-indictment Jack Warner could be chairman and deputy chairman of the finance committee.

The key reforms that most can agree on – term limits, transparency on pay and so on – are there. We will finally find out how much Blatter earned. But still the nagging feeling remains that the reforms lack two key things that may have given them more credibility in the eyes of a world that has long since lost any confidence in Fifa's ability to heal itself – first, sufficient independent oversight, and second, any mechanism for forcing the confederations that have been at the root of the problems to repeat the changes down the pyramid.

It is a huge task. When public companies such as Enron collapse into

criminality and chaos, they are liquidated. Fifa is trying to rebuild itself from within.

One key recommendation – that all 209 member associations must produce independently audited accounts on an annual basis – has the power to be transformative. But bearing in mind that a Transparency International study last year found that 81% of national associations had no publicly available accounts – plus the extent to which corruption is endemic in the system that Blatter built – it requires a big leap of faith.

Even as this brave new world has been pitched Fifa's disparate, often desperate, roll call of presidential candidates have toured the world sealing deals and trying to quell controversy in a depressing parade that has been endlessly reminiscent of campaigns past. The twin favourites

remain the Asian Football Confederation president, Bahrain's Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim al-Khalifa, and Uefa's general secretary, Gianni Infantino of Switzerland. The former was closely linked to Blatter, the latter to Michel Platini, the now banned former Uefa president. Hardly the winds of change.

Garth Sweeney, editor of Transparency International's *Global Corruption Report: Sport*, says: "The presidential process has itself shown again why Fifa needs urgent reform. The fact that some candidates are running without a manifesto, that a majority refused to participate in any public debate and that the decisions on eligibility remain a secret, despite some very serious allegations relating to at least one candidate, does not boost public trust. Nor does it increase confidence that the next president will lead by example in enacting serious reforms."

Quite. It has been a campaign short on debate and long on the sort of vote trading, politicking, promises and dirty tricks that have characterised Fifa election campaigns since Adidas's Horst Dassler helped propel João Havelange into power in 1974.

Yet the view of the tiny circle of hardy optimists at Fifa HQ is that the vote can be a first small step towards a brighter future where the wide-ranging governance reforms they propose will, over time, transform the most tarnished, embedded culture in global sport and bring sponsors and the public back on board.

But viewing Sheikh Salman's aggressive attempts to quash, by legal means, the legitimate questioning of his role in the suppression of 2011 pro-democracy protests in Bahrain and other historic allegations, one cannot help but feel queasy about the future. Meanwhile, a coalition of NGOs that wrote to all the candidates concluded that not one of them had pledged adequate steps to prevent human rights abuse and corruption.

Even if the reforms are approved (and that is far from certain, given the 75% mandate required), then the culture change required is so vast and far reaching that it may prove beyond Fifa's grasp.

No one has followed the events of the past year would rule out a further major twist or two. Blatter, still fighting his case to the bitter end, will lurk on the fringes of the circus where he was ringmaster.

There is the usual churning rumour mill about the intentions of the candidates and what stunts they may be planning to secure victory, but of more significance is whether the US or Swiss authorities are planning another dawn swoop on the luxury Baur au Lac hotel a venue has become a byword for Fifa malfeasance.

No matter how much those gathering in Zurich this week might pretend otherwise, they are no longer in control of their destiny.