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Did the World Cup Become a Toxic Mega-Event? [1]

The FIFA World Cup 2026 is over, and it may be remembered less for sporting achievements than for a series of extraneous, often strange, incidents. At least partially, geopolitical factors hijacked the event and left it with an unpleasant aftertaste, as I observed from afar.

Although the tournament was hosted by three countries, one host—the United States—clearly overshadowed the other two. A practical question follows: Can Canada and Mexico legitimately count this mega-event as a success? From a financial perspective the answer is likely yes, because tourists arrived and spent money.

But from the perspective of national image, the situation is more complicated. Canadian and Mexican authorities may prefer not to be associated with a tournament where sportsmanship was drowned out by quarrels, scandals, and rumors of rigged title races, alleged money?laundering, non?sporting pressure on Iran, the banning of a Somalian referee, the overturning of a red card, exorbitant ticket prices, the deliberate use of hydration breaks for advertising, photobombing during the celebration, symbolic underperformance during the final causing another portion of conspiracy theories, a coach raising the Palestinian issue, an halftime show criticized as inappropriate, a team demonstration with a banner about disputed territories, dubious tourist experiences marked by high prices and an unclear tipping culture, accusations of sportswashing against key sponsors, the booing of presidents at the final, incidents of racism directed at fans and players from specific countries, and other controversies.

Simon Anholt and Nick Cull, in their podcast series, noted that the effects of mega-events typically last about six months. Usually, attention focuses on the positive effects, but how long will the negative effects of a controversial mega-tournament persist? This World Cup is likely to remain memorable for the events mentioned above. We currently live in a turbulent geopolitical context with an extraordinary volume of information covering a vast number of events every day worldwide. One scenario is that World Cup-related issues will be displaced by other news. On the other hand, the event is global: the game continues, and players, organizations, and fans remain engaged, so every new development in upcoming national championships or qualifications will also be viewed through the prism of the World Cup.

"FIFA’s reputation, already tarnished by prior corruption scandals, did not become pristine as a result of the 2026 World Cup. Has this tournament become a toxic precedent?"

A second important question is how relevant this experience is for future hosts Portugal, Spain, and Morocco. FIFA's reputation, already tarnished by prior corruption scandals, did not become pristine as a result of the 2026 World Cup. Has this tournament become a toxic precedent? On the one hand, it set relatively low standards of transparency that future hosts may find hard to sink below. On the other hand, host countries have only partial agency because the key organizing authority is FIFA.

Therefore Portugal, Spain, and Morocco will need to devise measures to mitigate the possible toxicity of a mega-event. Potential strategies range from greater involvement of national associations and governments in decision-making and making that process transparent to an alternative, polar strategy of distancing themselves from controversial decisions. An ultimate option may include withdrawal from hosting the event. Historically, the burdens of hosting mega-events have already led selected hosts to withdraw for various reasons. For instance, Saudi Arabia's withdrawal from hosting the 2029 Asian Winter Games after winning the bid. The most recent withdrawal from hosting a FIFA World Cup occurred in 1986, when Mexico hosted the tournament instead of Colombia.

The sponsorship dimension is also significant in the discussion of event toxicity, since sponsors pay to place their logos and associate their brands with the tournament. To what extent did major companies from the oil, airline, automotive, banking and beverage sectors expect their brands to be linked to an event carrying elements of "toxicity"? Sponsor strategies may vary, and there have been past cases of sponsors leaving FIFA in response to reputational risks.

Finally, what strategies will FIFA pursue to revive the World Cup and restore its focus on footballing elements such as competitive spirit and sportsmanship, rather than turning it into an entertainment spectacle that casts a shadow over host countries, teams, sponsors, and the organization itself? Let's stay tuned and see whether the World Cup, which will mark its centenary in 2030, be the last dance that fundamentally damages football and its governance before something new emerges.