

Opinion **FIFA World Cup**

Qatar World Cup critics are unprepared for the rest of this century

The west will have to make far worse moral compromises as the centre of global power creeps elsewhere

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Doha, the capital of Qatar, which won its bid to host the 2022 Fifa World Cup more than a decade ago. Criticism of the choice of host raises questions over how western nations should deal with such regimes © Mariana Suarez/AFP/Getty Images

Janan Ganesh YESTERDAY

In the years after 9/11, as liberal sympathy for the US wore thin, you heard a lot of this:

The west is in no position to judge less democratic parts of the world. Scolding the Middle East in particular risks looking anti-Muslim. Regimes aren't bad, much less "evil", just products of local cultures that untravelled Americans don't understand. Even if things were so black and white, shame on us for courting Arab states in the past as oil suppliers or as cold war chess pieces. Did you know, by the way, that Texas still puts people to death?

Such was this relativism, this refusal to speak ill of what is now the "global south", that Christopher Hitchens left the left. The estrangement had begun when his comrades equivocated over the [Rushdie affair](#) in 1989.

So now, as liberals deplore [World Cup host Qatar](#) with such vehemence, it is natural to tease them. "What kept you?" and so on. "We are all neocons now", etc. A generation ago, their line wasn't just Stop the War in Iraq. (If only that campaign had carried the day.) It was that western values weren't for everyone. Today, on sex, on labour standards, on freedom of the press, it seems there is a universal minimum that must bind all countries.

What if they were closer to the truth the first time around? The relativism of the noughties had its problems. It came close to suggesting that non-white countries should be held to a lower standard. It snubbed the brave reformers in autocracies and conceded the central argument of their oppressors. If nothing else, though, it was prudent. It understood the limits of western influence in the world.

How much tighter those limits are now. To judge by the criticism of Qatar, lots of people are psychologically unprepared for the rest of this century. Whether or not China surpasses the US, the centre of world power is likely to creep away from the established democracies. (Look at projections of the [biggest economies](#) in 2050.) There will have to be a *modus vivendi*. If a sports tournament in a Gulf state is too much, what is permissible? Should Mario Draghi not have signed a [gas deal](#) with Algeria as Italian premier last summer? Should the US not be building up its already vast embassy in Bangkok, given the *lèse majesté* laws and on-off democracy there? As for Qatar itself, is sportswashing a regime bad, but directly enriching it through energy imports fine? If so, on what moral or strategic grounds?

Vietnam, that 100mn-strong beneficiary of friend-shoring, is “not free”, in US watchdog Freedom House’s reckoning. Indonesia, the fourth most populous nation on Earth, is just “partly free”. So too is much of the subcontinent, from where lots of the mistreated workers in Qatar have come. There is no western counterbalancing of China, no Asia strategy at all, without the help of some or all of these nations.

Until recently, liberals had seemed to absorb and accept all this. The rise of the “rest” was a well-ventilated subject even before the process really got going. But the outrage over Qatar — whose host status we have had [12 years](#) to get used to — has been stunning. I am glad it exists. Give me Enlightenment chauvinism over the pretence that all models of government are equal. This is the first World Cup since early childhood that I have not essentially suspended my life for, and unease with the host must be part of the reason.

The outrage reveals something about those who feel it, though. It is plain now that lots of people have paid lip service to the idea of a changing world, a less western-skewed balance of power, without reckoning with its practical effects. A World Cup in a not exceptionally brutal Gulf state: do we think this is the end of the moral compromises?

Fifa stands condemned for selling out to despots, as though it pretended to be a democratic club in the first place. In fact, it is a global one, with lots of illiberal or corrupt countries as members, that happens to be Zurich based. Argentina in 1978

corrupt countries as members, that happens to be Zurich-based. Argentina in 1978 (under the junta) and Russia in 2018 (while it [occupied Crimea](#)) are past hosts of its grandest tournament.

If this tawdry organisation scandalises people, imagine the reaction as great western nations navigate this century. Four months have passed since Joe Biden bumped fists with Saudi Arabia's crown prince. Having talked up a clash between democracies and autocracies, the US president now seems to define the enemy more narrowly as Russia and other active revisionists of the world system. He knows that victory depends on enlisting allies that fall short of the Jeffersonian ideal of governance. Others are slower to the same realisation. Liberals have traded relativism for a universal conscience just as the world makes such a thing unaffordable.

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