

The Bahrain Affair

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The political conflicts that arise in times of uncertainty trickle down into the world of sports due to the international stage that sports occupy. When it comes to motorsports, this sport in particular is faced with an interesting challenge as teams travel the world to compete in various cities and are not associated with a central location. The governing body of the pinnacle of motorsport, Formula 1, is known as Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) and they monitor numerous policies for the teams to abide by. The following will examine how the FIA have been accused of 'sportswashing' as the Bahrain Grand Prix remains on the racing calendar after the 2011 Bahrain Affair and how politics and the world of motorsports are connected.

CONTEXT:

Since 1904, the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) has been involved in the safety, sustainability, and accessibility of motorsport. As a global organization, the FIA collaborates with race tracks across the world in order to create a yearly race schedule for the Formula 1 season. According to Hans Erik Næss (2017), in February of 2011, the FIA announced that the Bahrain Grand Prix would be postponed as more than 30 people were killed in pro-democracy protests across the country. Næss (2017) explains, "Although human rights organizations reported that pro-democracy gatherings had been dispersed by force and with the subsequent use of torture, FIA representatives concluded, after having done their own investigation, that the country was stable," (pg. 2).

In June of the same year, this race was reinstated by the FIA to take place October 30th, even though 11 out of 12 teams protested this motion. The race was finally removed from the schedule for the 2011 season, however, in 2012 an almost identical situation occurred again and the race was completed on schedule.

ANALYSIS:

The Bahrain Grand Prix has been on the Formula 1 schedule since April 2004 as the first race to take place in the Middle East. The FIA has faced backlash from prominent human rights groups as they are accused of ‘sportswashing’ the Bahrain Grand Prix. According to an article from CNN, the issue of ‘sportswashing’ is still plaguing the Bahrain Grand Prix as concerns are still raised during the current 2023 season. Writer Sammy Mngqosini (2023) quotes Ahmed Alwadaei, the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD) Advocacy Director, ““Despite horrific human rights records, both states enjoy generous F1 contracts and exploit the F1 platform to sanitize their image on the world stage, while thousands of political prisoners languish behind bars,”” (Mngqosini, 2023). The statements made by important human rights organizations are unavoidable as they directly address the governing body of Formula 1 and link the country’s internal conflict with the pageantry of Formula 1.

Furthermore, according to the statutes and internal regulations for the FIA, they state in Article 1.2 (2023), “The FIA shall promote the protection of human rights and human dignity, and refrain from manifesting discrimination on account of race, skin colour, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic or social origin, language, religion, philosophical or political opinion, family situation or disability in the course of its activities and from taking any action in this respect,” (p. 3). This is in direct correlation to the issue of hosting a race in a non-democratic regime that can cause harm to the citizens of the host countries. In another journal by Hans Erik Næss (2017), he writes, “...whenever a Formula 1 race is held in undemocratic countries, power-holders use the accompanying global media attention to whitewash their international image in diverse ways,” (p. 3).

In addition to this statute, they add in Article 18.3 (2023), “The Ethics Committee shall be entrusted with safeguarding the integrity and reputation of motor sport, automobile mobility and tourism and persons as defined in the Preamble of the FIA Code of Ethics worldwide and shall perform all other missions entrusted to it by the President of the FIA concerning the development of and respect for ethical principles,” (p. 33). The connection between the statutes that the FIA hold themselves to and the ethics of the Bahrain Grand Prix are undeniable. With internal turmoil causing such distress for the people of Bahrain, the FIA has a responsibility as a governing body to address the ethical principles of maintaining this race on the F1 schedule. The cost to host the Bahrain Grand Prix is \$52 million (Coch, 2023) and will remain on the race calendar until 2036 as one of the longest contracts in the sport (Edmondson, 2023).

Furthermore, this case is particularly interesting when it comes to the connection between politics and sports as the athletes involved in the races have spoken out against the human rights issues happening in Bahrain. With prominent athletes addressing the concerns raised by the people of Bahrain, like Lewis Hamilton. “In 2020, seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton said the sport has a “massive issue” with human rights ahead of competing in Bahrain,” (Guy, 2020).

Moreover, this example suggests an endorsement of the connection between sports and politics as Formula 1 is an international sport that is not localized to one area. The globalization of the sport has increased this connection in terms of how the FIA has to respond to each country’s current political climate in order to create a proper race season.

CONCLUSION:

This case study aids in the understanding of the relationship between sports and politics. As the political turmoil in Bahrain in 2011 extends to not only the people of Bahrain, but the

sporting events that take place there as well. With both athletes and teams speaking out against the reinstatement of the Bahrain race in 2011, then the subsequent cancellation of the race, they demonstrate how they have the power to make a statement. The governing body that is the FIA can exercise their power in creating the schedule, but the athletes that participate in the races get to have a voice as well.

Although the FIA have exhibited their initiatives in their statutes, the discourse that has occurred due to their actions show that they must hold themselves accountable for the creation of race schedules and reevaluate the criteria for host countries. ‘Sportswashing’ is a term that the FIA should be able to pride themselves on actively fighting against, however, upon examining the contract with the Bahrain Grand Prix, the FIA are still keen on keeping the race in motion.

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