



PAKISTAN'S COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP WITH DIASPORA FOOTBALLERS

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KARACHI: When it was brought into the public eye that 14 out of the 26 players named in Morocco's FIFA World Cup 2022 squad were born outside of the North African country, the debate was about how far they can go in the mega event and not where they came from. When the Philippines' women's football team qualified for the FIFA World Cup 2023 last year, they were lauded for their incredible achievement rather than being scrutinised for the fact that the majority of its squad was born in the USA.

Then we have Pakistan, a country lagging light years behind modern-day football, which needs all the help it can get in order to make a name for itself in the sport but which still chooses to downplay the contributions of its diaspora players.

At a time when diaspora players are becoming increasingly important in teams all over the world, they are slighted by the local football community in Pakistan and some individuals in the media just

because they were not born in Pakistan.

As long as someone has Pakistani blood running through their veins, why does it matter where they were born? But to some, that doesn't cut it. Ask them why and they will tell you how the diaspora players are 'not Pakistani' and are 'affecting the confidence of local players'. And if that doesn't work, blame them for not 'attending camps'. Doesn't make sense, right? Don't worry, it's not supposed to. This is Pakistan football, you can say and do anything and easily get away with it. Be it Hassan Bashir or Zesh Rehman in the past or Nadia Khan in more recent times, all have suffered the same fate.

Keeping in mind the turmoil engulfing the Pakistan Football Federation (PFF) over the years, highlighted by warring factions, financial embezzlement and constitutional violations, the players have been made to bear the brunt of the situation which has consequently meant that little has been done to properly integrate and make full use of the diaspora for the national side.

Utilising foreign players won't make Pakistan a footballing powerhouse within a few years but at least it will help the national teams, both men and women, get back on their feet.

It goes without saying that Pakistan's footballing infrastructure is virtually non-existent. Due to a lack of facilities and top level coaching, the majority of local players are not able to reach their full potential and as a result find it hard to compete in the scant opportunities they get on the international level.

This is where 'foreign' players have an advantage: since they have access to better facilities and get more playing time in professional leagues, their experience is like gold dust for local players, who can learn from them to improve their own game.

However, the integration of foreign players in the national side needs to be done while ensuring merit as the top priority. Just because a player plays in a foreign league does not necessarily mean that he/she is automatically better than every other local player. The only criteria for judging players should be their skills on the field. If merit is bypassed, it becomes difficult to form a cohesive unit since the amalgamation of diaspora and local players already has its challenges in the shape of language barriers and different cultural backgrounds.

Take Morocco's example, the first African and the first Arab team to ever reach the FIFA World Cup semi-finals in Qatar last year, who formed a united team, based on merit, despite having players from different backgrounds.

"For this I have fought [...] Before this World Cup, we had a lot of problems about the guys born in Europe and guys not born in Morocco and a lot of journalists said, 'Why don't we play with guys born in Morocco?' Today, we have shown that every Moroccan is Moroccan," Morocco head coach Walid Regragui said in an interview after the FIFA World Cup.

But Morocco did not achieve success overnight: it required a lot of hard work and years of planning, which is a glowing example for countries at the bottom end of the football table.

However, countries like Morocco had a sellable vision, backed up by state of the art infrastructure, something Pakistan currently lacks. This begs the question: why should foreign players choose Pakistan over another country, especially when the former is far behind in terms of footballing stability? If Pakistan wants to successfully go down this diaspora route, it is important for all officials and coaching staff to be on the same page about the inclusion of foreigners in the national side while also having a proper scouting network in place to identify and recruit players.

Additionally, the local players in particular should be given clarity about the how the inclusion of foreigners will be used to bridge the short-term gap in quality while also dispelling the misconception that it will move Pakistani natives to the fringes.

Also, it will be very difficult to encourage quality diaspora players to don Pakistan's colours as long as the PFF's house is not in order. You can't expect foreign players to play for Pakistan if there are structural issues and politics involved in the running of the federation, especially when most of them are used to playing in environments – such as England – built to incubate professional footballers.

FIFA ban on Pakistan, in 2017 and 2021 due to third-party interference, has also not helped the country's cause since the crisis-ridden Pakistan Football Federation (PFF) has not been stable enough to attract top quality diaspora players over the years. It is the need of the hour that the PFF, which is currently run by a normalisation committee, be in hands of competent individuals who are elected through free and fair elections in line with FIFA statutes.

This PFF trouble has also meant that Pakistan could lose out on a talented player like Zidane Iqbal, who was eligible to play for Pakistan because of his Pakistani father and is the first British-South Asian to play for renowned English Premier League club Manchester United, who could have been a huge asset for the national side. Instead, he is likely to end up playing for Iraq since his mother belonged to the Western Asian country. Meanwhile, others like Etez Hussain, who plays for Apollon FC in the Cypriot First Division, and Aqsa Mushtaq, the first ever player of Pakistani heritage to play in the Italian top flight, could also miss out on playing for Pakistan during their peak years if the mess continues in Pakistan football.

Apart from the PFF, some of the responsibility also needs to be shouldered by the federal government which could make the process easier for acquiring the Pakistani passport.

Pakistan could also learn from other countries like Suriname who introduced a special sport passport in 2019 to ensure that athletes with dual citizenship can represent the country. The sports passport had a positive impact on football in Suriname as they qualified for the regional CONCACAF championship competition for the first time since 1985 in the same year. If other countries can take initiatives for the betterment of football, what's stopping Pakistan?

While diaspora players can help Pakistan get back into reckoning in the world of football, that doesn't it is the only issue that needs to be looked at. The country has a long and tough road ahead of them due to the absence of a football ecosystem, which includes proper coaching, facilities, club-based league and marketing, which doesn't allow the game to thrive in Pakistan. However, proper utilisation of foreign players is a good place to start.

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