

Dictatorships use sporting events as smokescreen for political repression

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Dictatorships' exploitation of major sporting events is not a new phenomenon: At the 1978 FIFA World Cup, Argentina's military government used the country's hosting to exercise state repression both before, during and after the tournament, researchers document. Credit: University of Copenhagen

A new study shows a systematic connection between major sporting events in autocracies and the persecution of political opponents.

In November, the FIFA World Cup 2022 will take place in Qatar. Allowing the Gulf monarchy, notorious for not taking human rights seriously, to host one of the world's biggest [sporting events](#) has been met with widespread criticism. Others argue that it can promote dialogue and understanding of human rights when dictatorships are allowed to hold international sporting events.

However, a new study by Adam Scharpf, assistant professor at the University of Copenhagen, and his colleagues from the Hertie School and Carnegie Mellon University, sheds a depressing light on the matter. The study shows that international sporting events often trigger a wave of repression when they take place in autocracies.

Struck during football matches

In particular, regimes use the prelude to major sporting events to crack down on potential "troublemakers"—typically dissidents and [political opponents](#). The researchers find a core example in Argentina, where a military dictatorship hosted the soccer World Cup in 1978.

Here, the researchers have examined the circumstances of the thousands of disappearances and murders presented by the Argentine Truth Commission after the fall of the dictatorship in 1983. The results reveal three phases of state repression: before, during and after the World Cup.

"Several weeks before the opening match, the Argentine regime carried out a huge operation, in which the authorities systematically kidnapped or murdered potential troublemakers—especially at night and in the early hours of the morning," says Adam Scharpf. He elaborates:

"During the World Cup itself, the regime struck discreetly while the matches were being played and the journalists were busy covering the matches. After the final and the departure of the foreign journalists, the

regime ramped up another wave of violence."

Nazi Olympics and jungle boxing

According to the authors, autocratic regimes do a cold-blooded cost-benefit analysis as hosts of international sporting events. Once the competitions are underway, the autocrats receive almost undivided attention from around the world. They use that attention to paint a picture of openness, hospitality and togetherness.

"But the limelight also contains dangers for those in power. Their political opponents can use the sporting events to demonstrate their discontent—under the indirect protection of foreign journalists. This is why the autocrats come down hard on their critics before the sporting events take place," emphasizes Adam Scharpf.

He and his research colleagues have found signs of a similar pattern of violence at the 1936 Olympics held in Berlin (hosted by the Nazi regime), at the legendary boxing match "The Rumble in the Jungle" between Muhammed Ali and George Foreman in Zaire (under dictator Mobutu Sese Seko) and at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

"We have discovered a clear and very worrying trend—not least because the proportion of autocratic hosts of major sporting events has more than quadrupled since the end of the Cold War," Adam Scharpf points out.

He concludes that the awarding of international sporting events to dictatorships only exacerbates [human rights](#) abuses.

"But it will require a broad, social alliance to pressure politicians and international sports federations to prevent dictatorships from hosting [major sporting events](#) in the future," assesses Adam Scharpf.

The research is published in *American Political Science Review*.

More information: Adam Scharpf et al, International Sports Events and Repression in Autocracies: Evidence from the 1978 FIFA World Cup, *American Political Science Review* (2022). [DOI: 10.1017/S0003055422000958](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422000958)

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