

The misdirected outrage over the women's football team strike



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A section of players of the Bangladesh national women's football team went on a training strike last week over alleged behavioural issues of coach Peter Butler, and the Bangladesh Football Federation's (BFF) apparent lack of action despite repeated complaints. The strike, which involved 18 national team players, including many of the stars of the two recent SAFF Championship wins, is not unprecedented in sports. Players banding together to force out management—both fairly and unfairly—is a regular occurrence. However, the vitriol hurled towards our footballers and the refusal to acknowledge their grievances has been eye-opening. It is yet another reminder of how we as a society fail to acknowledge the humanity of athletes, the dignity of women, and when it comes to female athletes, the sheer lack of respect.

On the players' part, they have communicated quite clearly the reasons behind their demands. The three page joint statement made by the players details both specific incidents of ineptitude and misconduct by the coach and the generally abrasive nature of his demeanour. If these allegations made by the players hold true, Butler has a lot to answer for—not least his decision to "wilfully" field lesser experienced players in an important match against Pakistan, his miscalculation over the number of substitutions allowed in a game, and his abusive pitchside behaviour towards a player.

The statement also mentioned

the coach's off-pitch behaviour, and much of the players' grievances have to do with his derogatory tone and offhand comments about their clothing, bodies, and their personal lives. The allegation is that he has created an environment of terror, disrespect, and division within the team.

As mentioned before, sports fans in the 21st century are more than familiar with "player power." It is a phrase that is negatively used to refer to the fact that players across different sports and different nations make up the most powerful group within a team structure, and often band together to oust coaches and other management staff with whom they fail to get along. A recent example would be the litany of first team coaches fired at famous football club Manchester United, where the players have consistently failed to perform over many years, but instead of any wholesale changes to the squad, each time the coach is pushed under the bus.

Another example closer to home would be our own national men's cricket team, where for years, it has been alleged that coaches have had to navigate the egos and the demands of the core group of senior players or face unceremonious sackings. In none of these cases did the players ever come out in the media and spell out clearly what their problems were. Their star power was enough to move the pieces in the back rooms while things changed in the public eye according to their wishes.

Yet, with the national women's

football team, despite being presented with a detailed account of the background to their revolt, the public seems to be largely unconvinced. The public, as sampled on social media, seems to be appalled by the idea that players are humans too, who demand to be treated with the respect that every person earns by the virtue of being born. Fans have reacted

at home assuming a professional athlete does not know the difference between fitness demands and body shaming is perplexing.

The criticism has wholly overlooked the technical deficiencies of the coach pointed out by the players. People have even gone so far as to belittle the achievement of the two-time SAFF Champions,

an obsessive and unhealthy sense of entitlement from athletes. It is lost on spectators that athletes go through an extremely difficult journey to get to a position where they can don the national colours, and if they fail to perform, people like to say that the money being spent on them is a waste. The truth, however, is never as simple. The money sports bodies

The public reaction to this whole ordeal has gone off the charts in its harshness and disproportionate toxicity. And given Bangladesh's social context, one has to wonder what part the gender of the players had in eliciting this reaction. However, the thing about misogyny and prejudice is that they always bubble under the surface, and it doesn't take a lot for them to seep through.

For instance, when a letter from the players reached the BFF president, its contents were not the primary topic of discussion. News outlets quoted members of a special BFF committee expressing surprise that these players could pen a letter in English, and apparently that has become a major point of the investigation. Would this have even been a humorous thought had the players been men?

On the other hand, coach Peter Butler has gone out and spoken to the media in a tone that lends credence to the players' allegations and also epitomises the derisive way these players are being spoken about right now. It may just be that the people of the country are taking cues from responsible authorities like the BFF officials and the national team coach on how to mistreat some of the most successful athletes in the country's history.

"You gotta remember, I'm from the football culture, where if they performed and did things which they had been doing here, they would be upstairs, having their bags packed, they'd be frogmarched down the stairs and kicked out into the streets," he told reporters on Wednesday.

"I mean, do they understand what it's like to work in a department store, stack shelves, do menial work? They are lucky girls."

I, for one, am outraged that a coach gets to speak like this about my country's national footballers. Why the rest of the country is outraged over the training strike but not this tone of language is a question without an answer.



Senior players of the Bangladesh national women's football team speak at a press conference in Dhaka about the alleged behavioural issues of coach Peter Butler, on January 30, 2025.

FILE PHOTO: COLLECTED

over harshly to the players' allegation that the details of their personal lives were being questioned by their coach, which is a clear violation of a professional relationship. Many fans are saying that the players want "impunity" for their "antisocial behaviour" whatever that means. Many have even speculated that the players have cried body shaming because their fitness issues may have been pointed out by the coach, but the audacity of regular people sitting

overlooking the fact that these were the only regional accomplishments for a Bangladeshi team in football or cricket in almost two decades. The worst excess of all has been the abuse players have been subjected to on their personal social media handles—abuse that has extended to death and rape threats, as stated by Matsushima Sumaya, one of the national team players whose "crime" was to help her teammates write a letter in English.

In Bangladesh, people seem to have

spend on players is made because of the players. It is because players are successful or have star power that a sport makes any money at all, and this is the pool from which boards like BFF pays players. The footballers' strike that has disrupted the women's team's training seems to have stoked this sense of entitlement among fans, who think—mistakenly—that the players and their well-being were not the major factors behind the team's recent success.

Can Trump actually 'take over' Gaza?



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The US government's invasion of Afghanistan, for example—on the premise of self-defence—did kill innocent civilians, despite claims that it was only targeting terrorists and enemy combatants. The US has ratified both The Hague and Geneva conventions that render unjustified killing of innocent civilians or unnecessary destruction of property

statehood and the condition was suspension of Israeli settlers' plans to annex the West Bank. Trump hit the middle ground between the Israeli far-right and UAE to score the deal. Trump's transactionalism embedded in his foreign policy that predates his outlandish statements presents a few questions: is the plan a calculated move to tame both Hamas and Israeli far-right? Or is it a negotiating tactic with the Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia? Both are plausible.

For Hamas, Trump's plan applies maximum pressure to give up the control of Gaza and simply maintain a presence there. The flip side of Trump's pressure could be Hamas pulling out of the ceasefire agreement, which jeopardises the Israeli hostages returning, and the second phase of the ceasefire which includes a permanent end to the war and withdrawal of Israeli troops. The latter holds little meaning now as Trump suggests Palestinians should leave their homeland anyways. Hamas, which has been destabilised, might settle for maintaining some sort of presence of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, as it would not be able to endure against US troops. On the other hand, far-right extremist Israelis—specifically those who were unhappy with Netanyahu and

On the geopolitical front, relations with the US have been a source of security aid and financial assistance for some Arab states, and have

unwavering with "no compromise," which could presumably refer to the UAE normalisation deal. The statement added that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman "clearly and unequivocally reaffirmed this stance."

For the past 15 months of Palestinian slaughter in Gaza, many of the Arab states have been on the sideline, with Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia clamping down on pro-Palestinian protests in their own nations. All these nations have authoritarian governments who view grassroots activism as a threat to their regimes. "Arab states today do not like Palestinian nationalism because Palestinian nationalism is a source of popular mobilisation on the Arab street," according to Nader Hashemi, director of the Prince Alwaleed Center for Christian-Muslim Understanding at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. But in order to keep pro-Palestinian sentiments under control, Arab states have catered to public opinion with token gestures to support Palestine against Israel and succumbing to Trump's plan would fuel public anger.

Whether Trump can coerce Arab States remains to be seen. The US president made the statement with the prime minister of Israel beside him, and to analyse it with the "madman" theory, as David Remnick of the *New Yorker* has done, only circulates blame games at those who voted for Trump, believing his campaign promise that the US would end all foreign wars, especially in Gaza. Trump has intentions in saying what he said, and determining what they are is difficult; he is the harbinger of potent unpredictability.

Egypt, on the other hand, needs US money to exist, and also serves as a lynchpin containing a potential powder keg of radical sentiment that, if detonated, would puncture European and US interests. Jordan, as well, is not only a close ally of the US, but dependent on US aid. Trump has already threatened economic blockades for Jordan, and King Abdullah is scheduled to visit the White House next week. White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt has indicated that Jordan can change its position and accept Palestinian refugees from Gaza. But Egypt and Jordan can avert an economic blow if the Gulf nations unite against Trump's Gaza plan.

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The Trump administration has made it clear that the "Riviera of the Middle East" would not be made with US funds, supposedly expecting Arab states to foot the bill. Trump's proposal to play around with the lives of Palestinians could very well be a far-reaching offer on the table in exchange for normalisation, or Gaza's reconstruction funded by wealthy Gulf nations. If we think of it as a deal, it also means that he could settle for less. He could very well not move forward if Arab states offer concessions acceptable to his geo-economic agendas. Donald Trump does not always follow through. But whether he does usually depends on short-term gains that portray him as the winner and the强man who is "reviving America" as the sole superpower—in other words, making America great again.



US President Donald Trump welcomes Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the entrance of the White House in Washington DC, US on February 4, 2025.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Palestinian territories and still talked about "two states" and "peace." Sure, Biden had not suggested a plan so aggressive, but his administration had gone around trying to find an "international coalition" that would temporarily govern Gaza after the war. The fact is, US foreign policy has never intentionally recognised Nakba as a root cause of Palestinian resentment towards Israel, and no government has truly cared about Palestinians' rights to self-determination. US interests in the Middle East lie with strong-arming Israel. One could argue that Trump has replaced "Israel" with "United States" in terms of who will own and govern Palestinian land and Palestinian people.

As history is laden with unaccountability, it should be clear that laws will not stop Trump's plan. So what can? Geopolitical relationships with the Arab states, and especially, Saudi Arabia, the most powerful US ally in the region.

In 2020, Trump managed to persuade UAE and Bahrain to sign his Abraham Accords. UAE's reservation to signing the deal was Palestinian

as a violation of international law, though not "war crimes." Though the country ratified both conventions, it repeatedly violated them in Afghanistan. The US government denied many instances of civilian suffering until *The New York Times* published declassified records. Despite the documentation, none of the US military officials involved in strikes were held accountable. Only the victims paid the price for the US military's "mistake." We have seen Netanyahu use the word "mistake" to refer to the deadly fire in refugee tents in Rafah last year, after images of charred bodies and a beheaded child went viral.

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Worldwide uproar followed Trump's statement, and Saudi Arabia's foreign ministry was the first to react to the announcement. They affirmed that the nation's position on the establishment of a Palestinian state is firm and

prevented them from confronting Israel. For Mohammed bin Salman, eliminating Hamas and Hezbollah, who do not exist in Saudi Arabia, has been in his best interest against archrival Iran to maintain his nation's dominance in the Middle East, and to ensure no politicisation of Islam can topple him in his country. Normalising relationships with Israel, too, is in his interest as it's good for business—an ideology he shares with Trump. Mohammed bin Salman wants deals with the US for security and weapons, and Trump has already talked about asking Saudi Arabia to invest \$1 trillion in the US economy. Here, Trump's Gaza plan puts a spanner in the works. Mohammed