

SPORT



“When you’re playing at home there is always an added pressure. I’m not running away from the fact. To be honest, there will be nerves, there will be pressure, but if you see the positive side of it, there’ll be a lot of cheer around.”



India captain Suryakumar Yadav ahead of their T20 World Cup opener against USA

The price of BELLING THE CAT

ASHEAQ UL-ALAM

Politics has always been an inseparable part of cricket.

It has been so since the days of the Imperial Cricket Council – the previous name of the International Cricket Council – when being a member of the Commonwealth was one of the prerequisites for becoming a Test nation.

In the modern age, money has been added to the unholy cocktail of politics and cricket, creating a concoction that is gradually choking the life out of the sport.

In the last one-and-a-half years, governments of three separate countries have openly imposed their will on their national teams’

participation in two global cricketing events.

First came India, informing the ICC in November 2024 that it would not travel to Pakistan for the following year’s ICC Champions Trophy under its government’s order.

A little over a year later, Bangladesh, also under government directives and amid security concerns, said it did not want to travel to India for the ICC T20 World Cup, beginning today.

Then, on February 1, the Pakistan government announced that its national team would not take part in the highly anticipated group-stage clash against India in Colombo on February 15.

In all three instances, the ICC reacted differently – going to

great lengths to accommodate India’s request, outright rejecting Bangladesh’s relocation plea, and asking Pakistan to reconsider its stance.

Many, mostly from India, have argued that India’s situation was different from Bangladesh’s, as it had announced its decision not to travel months in advance. But what they forgot to consider was that the situation which started it all – dropping Mustafizur Rahman from Indian Premier League (IPL) franchise Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) on instructions from the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) – was a move made by India. And it was done just over a month before the World Cup, meaning Bangladesh’s security concerns about travelling to a country that could not provide safety to one player were raised only a few days before the marquee event, invalidating the whole debate about requesting the ICC sooner for relocation of World Cup games.

However, the difference in the ICC’s response in Bangladesh’s and Pakistan’s cases gives an intriguing and rather unflattering insight into how the ICC actually works.

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It took the ICC nearly three weeks before officially responding to Bangladesh’s relocation request through a media release, in which it brazenly refused the plea in a tone that felt less like an address to a member nation and more like an admonishment dealt to a pupil by the headmaster.

But that same headmaster became

almost apologetic towards Pakistan, officially responding within hours and requesting reconsideration.

The reason for this polar-opposite reaction, unsurprisingly, is money.

If the India-Pakistan clash does not happen, the ICC will reportedly miss out on a \$250 million payday.

Meanwhile, Indian analysts and former players, who were dismissive of rumours of a Pakistan boycott, are now clutching their pearls in outrage after, for once, being at the receiving end of the cricketing cold war with Pakistan they have long fuelled.

When the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) requested relocation of their World Cup matches from the ICC, it indirectly challenged India’s unmitigated influence over world cricket.

Although the BCB displayed diplomatic naivety in some regards, and Bangladesh were eventually replaced by the World Cup, their simple act of standing their ground has seemingly emboldened others to speak up.

Many former Pakistani players have been critical of the double standards shown by the ICC. Former Australia pacer Jason Gillespie spoke about the same on X and then self-admittedly had to take the post down owing to online abuse from Indians.

Former England captain Nasser Hussain openly applauded Bangladesh and Pakistan for their stances, saying, “I actually quite like Bangladesh sticking to their guns. They stood up for their player, the Fizz. And I also quite like Pakistan – I know it’s political – but I like Pakistan sticking up for Bangladesh.”

For belling the cat that runs world cricket, Bangladesh will miss out on a World Cup for the first time since 1999.

However, whenever historians regale the story of the 2026 T20 World Cup, Bangladesh’s name will inevitably come up.

Associate nations carry momentum and hope

STAR SPORTS REPORT

The ICC Men’s T20 World Cup has long been a proving ground for associate nations, a place where emerging teams test their growth against the game’s elite. The 10th edition brings together a familiar cast of associates alongside one notable newcomer, with Italy set to make their World Cup debut after a historic qualification campaign.

Italy’s arrival is symbolic of cricket’s expanding footprint. Led by Wayne Madsen and ranked 27th, the Italians remain outsiders on paper, having played only six T20s since the 2024 World Cup, winning three. Yet qualification alone represents a significant achievement for a nation where the sport operates on the fringes.

For Italy, this tournament is less about immediate results and more about establishing credibility at the highest level.

Several associate sides, however, arrive with stronger recent form and growing expectations. Nepal, captained by Rohit Paudel, have quietly built one of the most impressive records among associates. Ranked 16th, they have won 16 of their last 24 matches since 2024. Despite never progressing beyond the first round, Nepal’s consistency suggests a side edging closer to a breakthrough.



Canada have followed a similar upward curve. Under Dilpreet Bajwa, they have claimed 17 wins from 25 matches since their 2024 debut, reflecting a team learning quickly at international level. The United States, meanwhile, continue to ride the confidence gained from their surprise Super 8 finish in 2024, winning 12 of 20 matches under Monank Patel and proving they are no longer mere pushovers.

Experience remains a key asset for others. The Netherlands and Namibia, both Super 12 participants in 2021, bring tactical discipline and tournament know-how, even if their recent records suggest tighter contests against improving rivals. UAE, one of the busiest associate sides, have played 41 matches since 2024, maintaining steady results under Muhammad Waseem.

For Ireland, Scotland and Oman, the challenge is rediscovering momentum after mixed runs, while continuing to nurture depth at international level.

For all these teams, the T20 World Cup is about more than qualification or rankings. It is about progress, visibility and belief. And for Italy, simply walking out for their first World Cup match will mark the start of a new chapter – one written on cricket’s biggest stage.

T20 WORLD CUP FIXTURES

GROUPS

- Group A**
India, Pakistan, United States, Netherlands, Namibia
- Group B**
Australia, Sri Lanka, Ireland, Zimbabwe, Oman
- Group C**
England, West Indies, Scotland, Nepal, Italy
- Group D**
New Zealand, South Africa, Afghanistan, Canada, United Arab Emirates

7 FEBRUARY: Pakistan v Netherlands (Colombo SSC, 11:30 am), West Indies v Scotland (Kolkata, 3:30 pm), India v USA (Mumbai, 7:30 pm)

8 FEBRUARY: New Zealand v Afghanistan (Chennai, 11:30 am), England v Nepal (Mumbai, 3:30 pm), Sri Lanka v Ireland (Colombo RPS, 7:30 pm)

9 FEBRUARY: Scotland v Italy (Kolkata, 11:30 am), Zimbabwe v Oman (Colombo SSC, 3:30 pm), South Africa v Canada (Ahmedabad, 7:30 pm)

10 FEBRUARY: Netherlands v Namibia (Delhi, 11:30 am), New Zealand v UAE (Chennai, 3:30 pm), Pakistan v USA (Colombo SSC, 7:30 pm)

11 FEBRUARY: South Africa v Afghanistan (Ahmedabad, 11:30 am), Australia v Ireland (Colombo RPS, 3:30 pm), England v West

Indies (Mumbai, 7:30 pm)

12 FEBRUARY: Sri Lanka v Oman (Pallekele, 11:30 am), Nepal v Italy (Mumbai, 3:30 pm), India v Namibia (Delhi, 7:30 pm)

13 FEBRUARY: Australia v Zimbabwe (Colombo RPS, 11:30 am), Canada v UAE (Delhi, 3:30 pm), USA v Netherlands (Chennai, 7:30 pm)

14 FEBRUARY: Ireland v Oman (Colombo SSC, 11:30 am), England v Scotland (Kolkata, 3:30 pm), New Zealand v South Africa (Ahmedabad, 7:30 pm)

15 FEBRUARY: West Indies v Nepal (Mumbai, 11:30 am), USA v Namibia (Chennai, 3:30 pm), India v Pakistan (Colombo RPS, 7:30 pm)

16 FEBRUARY: Afghanistan v UAE (Delhi, 11:30 am), England v Italy (Kolkata, 3:30 pm), Australia

v Sri Lanka (Pallekele, 7:30 pm)

17 FEBRUARY: New Zealand v Canada (Chennai, 5:30), Ireland v Zimbabwe (Pallekele, 9:30), Scotland v Nepal (Mumbai, 13:30)

18 FEBRUARY: South Africa v UAE (Delhi, 11:30 am), Pakistan v Namibia (Colombo SSC, 3:30 pm), India v Netherlands (Ahmedabad, 7:30 pm)

19 FEBRUARY: West Indies v Italy (Kolkata, 11:30 am), Sri Lanka v Zimbabwe (Colombo RPS, 3:30 pm), Afghanistan v Canada (Chennai, 7:30 pm)

20 FEBRUARY: Australia v Oman (Pallekele, 7:30 pm)

21 FEBRUARY: Y2 v Y3 (Colombo RPS, 7:30 pm)

22 FEBRUARY: Y1 v Y4 (Pallekele, 3:30 pm), X1 v X4 (Ahmedabad, 7:30)

23 FEBRUARY: X2 v X3 (Mumbai 7:30 pm)

24 FEBRUARY: Y1 v Y3 (Pallekele, 7:30 pm)

25 FEBRUARY: Y2 v Y4 (Colombo RPS, 7:30 pm)

26 FEBRUARY: X3 v X4 (Ahmedabad, 3:30 pm), X1 v X2 (Chennai, 7:30 pm)

27 FEBRUARY: Y1 v Y2 (Colombo RPS, 7:30 pm)

28 FEBRUARY: Y3 v Y4 (Pallekele, 7:30 pm)

1 MARCH: X2 v X4 (Delhi, 3:30 pm), X1 v X3 (Kolkata, 7:30 pm)

4 MARCH: Semi-final 1 (Kolkata or Colombo, 7:30 pm)

5 MARCH: Semi-final 2 (Mumbai, 7:30 pm)

8 MARCH: Final (Ahmedabad or Colombo, 7:30 pm)



PRE-DETERMINED SEEDING FOR THE SUPER 8 STAGE

- X GROUP**
India (X1), Australia (X2), West Indies (X3), South Africa (X4)
- Y GROUP**
England (Y1), New Zealand (Y2), Pakistan (Y3), Sri Lanka (Y4)