
Distinguishing Between Interference and Intervention in Football Matters

By Dennis Mumble - 15 November 2025

Amid the worsening governance crisis in the South African Football Association (SAFA) over the past several months, the South African Government is decidedly reluctant to intervene in the ongoing malaise that has engulfed the football body. Its President, former Acting CEO, and CFO are standing trial for alleged fraud; its financial status resembles a street corner beggar with begging bowl in hand; and its bungling management has become legendary in the popular narrative.

Yet, Government has been reluctant to step in. What drives this paralysis? According to Minister of Sport, Arts, and Culture, Gayton McKenzie, FIFA will not look kindly upon Government involving itself in the affairs of the football association. The fear also stems from a perceived threat that FIFA may suspend the football association, which jeopardises Bafana Bafana's appearance in the 2026 FIFA World Cup, its first merit-based qualification since 2002.

This anxiety is firmly rooted in the provisions of Article 19(1) of the FIFA Statutes, which decrees that each member association must "*manage its affairs independently and without undue influence from third parties*". This clause is deliberately broad, crafted to shield football from political manipulation,

coercive directives, and any form of external pressure that compromises the autonomy of decision-making bodies.

"Undue influence" therefore refers not merely to explicit acts — such as ordering an association to change its leadership — but also to subtler forms of pressure, including threats of withdrawing public funding to achieve sporting objectives, leveraging political authority to shape internal outcomes, or imposing conditions that effectively steer the association's governance choices. FIFA's interpretation extends beyond overt interference to encompass any situation in which external actors distort or predetermine the internal functions of a football body, thereby undermining the fairness, legitimacy, and independence of its operations.



This concept of "undue influence" is crucial in distinguishing prohibited interference from permissible intervention. While governments retain the sovereign right — and often the obligation — to fund sport, enforce national laws, and protect the public interest, these actions become problematic the moment they compromise institutional autonomy. If state involvement supports development, enforces legal compliance, or strengthens governance without encroaching upon internal decision-making, it qualifies as intervention and remains compatible with FIFA's requirements.

However, if the state's conduct exerts pressure that shapes electoral outcomes, dictates governance structures, or manipulates disciplinary processes, it crosses the threshold into interference prohibited by Article 19(1). Understanding this boundary is essential for maintaining the integrity of football governance while recognising the legitimate role of government in addressing mismanagement, corruption, and developmental needs. In this way, the concept of "undue influence" serves as the hinge between sovereign oversight and FIFA's insistence on organisational independence, providing the doctrinal foundation for the distinction articulated in the discussion that follows.



In the global governance of football, few issues generate as much recurring controversy as the boundary between legitimate government intervention and prohibited government interference. FIFA's regulatory framework draws a sharp distinction between the two, yet national authorities and football stakeholders often misunderstand or deliberately conflate these concepts. This confusion has, over the years, led to unnecessary tensions, suspensions of national associations, and an erosion of trust between governments and football administrators.

At the heart of FIFA's position is the principle of institutional autonomy. Football associations must be free from political manipulation, particularly in matters of governance, elections, and disciplinary processes. When a government seeks to direct or control these internal affairs — whether by appointing or dismissing executives, influencing the outcome of elections, or dictating how leagues should operate — FIFA regards such conduct as government interference. This form of intrusion is expressly prohibited under Article 19 of the FIFA Statutes, which guarantees the independence of member associations. History shows that when this independence is compromised, FIFA acts decisively: suspensions are common, and they serve as a stern reminder of the organisation's zero-tolerance stance towards political encroachment.

Yet FIFA does not insist on an absolute separation between the state and the national football association. On the contrary, the organisation recognises that government involvement is both inevitable and, in many instances, desirable. This form of involvement — termed government intervention — is permissible when it supports rather than supplants football governance. States may, for example, fund the development of stadiums, enhance grassroots programmes, or collaborate with associations on anti-doping initiatives. Equally, governments remain responsible for enforcing national laws related to corruption, financial misconduct, or public safety. Such measures do not infringe FIFA's standards as long as the football association retains full control over its internal decision-making and sporting autonomy.

The distinction therefore lies not in the mere presence of government activity, but in its purpose, method, and impact on independence. Intervention becomes interference the moment the state crosses from supportive oversight into operational control. The challenge — for policymakers, administrators, and lawmakers alike — is to strike a balance that allows the state to fulfil its legitimate duties without compromising the autonomy that global sporting governance requires.

Understanding this tension is essential in South Africa where football governance is fraught with mismanagement, allegations of corruption, and administrative incompetence. Government may feel compelled to act, particularly when the public interest is at stake. FIFA, meanwhile, remains wary of political overreach. Navigating this space requires nuanced

appreciation of both domestic legal obligations and international sporting norms.

In essence, FIFA's framework may be summarised simply:

- Interference is the politically motivated control of football administration and is strictly prohibited.
- Intervention, however, is the lawful, supportive involvement of the state — permitted so long as the association's autonomy is preserved.

This distinction is not merely semantic. It defines the delicate interplay between sovereign authority and the global governance of the world's most popular sport, and it remains central to any meaningful debate on football governance in South Africa and beyond.

Comparative Table: FIFA on Interference vs. Intervention

Country	Year	Nature of Government Action	FIFA's View	Outcome
Nigeria	2014 & 2016	Government attempted to remove elected NFF officials and install its own administrators	Interference	FIFA suspended Nigeria until officials were reinstated Pulse Sports Nigeria
Pakistan	2021	Government-backed group took control of the PFF headquarters, ousting elected officials	Interference	FIFA suspended Pakistan due to third-party takeover Pulse Sports Nigeria
India	2022	Supreme Court appointed a Committee of Administrators to run the AIFF	Interference (judicial/governmental control of elections)	FIFA suspended India briefly; lifted after elections were restored safootball.net

Country	Year	Nature of Government Action	FIFA's View	Outcome
Zambia	2018	Government threatened to dissolve FAZ over corruption concerns	Interference risk	FIFA warned Zambia; suspension avoided after government backed down safootball.net
Namibia	2020	Government investigated corruption in NFA but allowed football body to manage elections	Intervention (acceptable)	No suspension; FIFA accepted oversight as long as autonomy remained safootball.net
Sierra Leone	2018	Government suspended FA officials over corruption allegations	Interference	FIFA suspended Sierra Leone until officials were reinstated safootball.net
Greece	2016	Government suspended the domestic cup after crowd violence	Intervention	FIFA accepted the move as a safety measure; no suspension
Kenya	2022	Government disbanded FKF and appointed a caretaker committee	Interference	FIFA suspended Kenya; lifted after elections were restored

Summary

- Interference = direct control of football governance (appointments, dissolutions, election management). Always prohibited. Typically involves:
 - Government appointing/dismissing football officials
 - Seizing control of football premises
 - Managing elections or dissolving associations
- Intervention = oversight or support (funding, anti-corruption investigations, infrastructure). Permissible if the football body retains autonomy.
- FIFA applies Article 19 of its Statutes, requiring independence of member associations. Breaches lead to suspension from international football.

Intervention is tolerated when:

- It addresses safety, corruption, or legal compliance

- The football body retains autonomy in governance and elections
- **FIFA's Statutory Basis:** Article 14 and 19 of the FIFA Statutes require that member associations manage their affairs independently and without influence from third parties.

	NIGERIA	2014
FIFA suspended Nigeria when the government removed Nigeria Football Federation (NFF) officials from office.		
	GREECE	2016
Suspended when the government cancelled Greek FA's Cup against FIFA rules.		
	ZAMBIA	2017
The government attempted to dissolve the Football Association of Zambia (FAZ).		
	SIERRA LEONE	2018
FIFA suspended the federation upon discovering that corruption charges were brought against the federation's president.		
	PAKISTAN	2021
FIFA suspended Pakistan when a group of officials backed by the government seized control of the Pakistan Football Federation HQ.		
	ZIMBABWE	2022
The mandate of the Zimbabwe Football Association was revoked by the government sports and recreation commission.		
	INDIA	2022
Suspended for 'undue influence from third parties' as it relates to AIFF.		
	ZIMBABWE	REINSTATED 2022
Suspended again due to government interference.		