
THE ELECTION BEFORE THE ELECTION

How SAFA's 2026 electoral process is repeating the methods that compromised the 2022 cycle

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11 August 2026

There is a fundamental misunderstanding about elections that needs to be confronted in South African football.

An election is not simply the event that takes place on the day delegates gather, ballot papers are distributed and votes are counted. The integrity of an election is determined by the entire process that leads to that moment: the rules under which it is conducted, the composition of the electorate, the administration of the electoral process, the treatment of candidates and voters, the resolution of disputes and, above all, whether those competing for power are able to influence the machinery through which that power is acquired.



This distinction has become particularly important as South African Football Association (SAFA) members approach the 2026 national elections.

What is unfolding across parts of the SAFA membership bears striking similarities to the methods and practices that characterised the electoral cycle preceding the 2022 national elections. There is no difference this time, the pattern is being discovered in real time. It is taking place in full view, with complaints, official correspondence, photographs, video recordings and other documentary evidence providing a record of what has occurred.

I documented many of the constitutional and electoral concerns arising from the previous cycle in my book *Red Card for a Stolen Victory*, published following the 2022 elections. The book was an attempt to examine what happens to a sporting institution when the pursuit and retention of political power begins to overwhelm the principles of constitutional governance.

Four years later, the uncomfortable conclusion is that many of the lessons identified then have not been learned.

Indeed, some of the same methods appear to be returning.

The real election starts long before Congress

The most important question about an election should therefore not be confined to what happens at Congress.

It should begin with a much earlier question:

How was the electorate that will vote at Congress constituted?

This is particularly important in SAFA because the national electorate is not an abstract body of voters. It is built from the membership structures below Congress. The outcomes of Regional and Local Football Association elections therefore have a direct bearing on the composition and political character of the electorate that ultimately participates in the national election.

This creates an obvious incentive for any incumbent leadership seeking re-election to influence the outcome of those preceding elections.

If the electorate can be shaped before the national election, the national election itself becomes considerably less uncertain.

This is where the current electoral cycle becomes so troubling.

The evidence demonstrates a pattern in which SAFA officials and NEC members who are openly aligned with the incumbent President's re-election campaign have become involved in the

administration, supervision or intervention in elections at Regional and LFA level – not as officials of those Regions or LFAs, but as officials of a national committee that serves an advisory role in membership-related matters.

The individuals concerned occupy senior positions within the incumbent's campaign organisation. One is the national chairperson of the campaign. Others occupy provincial leadership positions in the campaign in the North West, Kwazulu-Natal, Eastern Cape and Western Cape.

Their involvement in local and regional electoral processes is therefore not occurring in a political vacuum. These are people who have publicly aligned themselves with a particular candidate for the national Presidency while simultaneously participating in processes that help determine the composition of the electorate that will ultimately elect that President.

This is the phenomenon I have described as the deployment of “*electoral hitmen*”.

The expression is deliberately provocative, but it describes a serious governance problem. It does not refer to violence or criminality. It refers to the use of politically committed operatives to enter electoral environments where their involvement can influence the outcome in favour of the political interest they support.

In any properly governed organisation, the question should not be whether these individuals are capable of acting impartially. The question is why individuals so closely associated with one candidate's campaign should be placed in positions where their decisions or interventions can influence the electoral environment in which that candidate's voters are selected.

That is a fundamental conflict-of-interest concern.

The football referee analogy

Football itself provides perhaps the simplest illustration.

Nobody would accept a referee officiating a match while simultaneously serving on the executive committee of one of the teams.

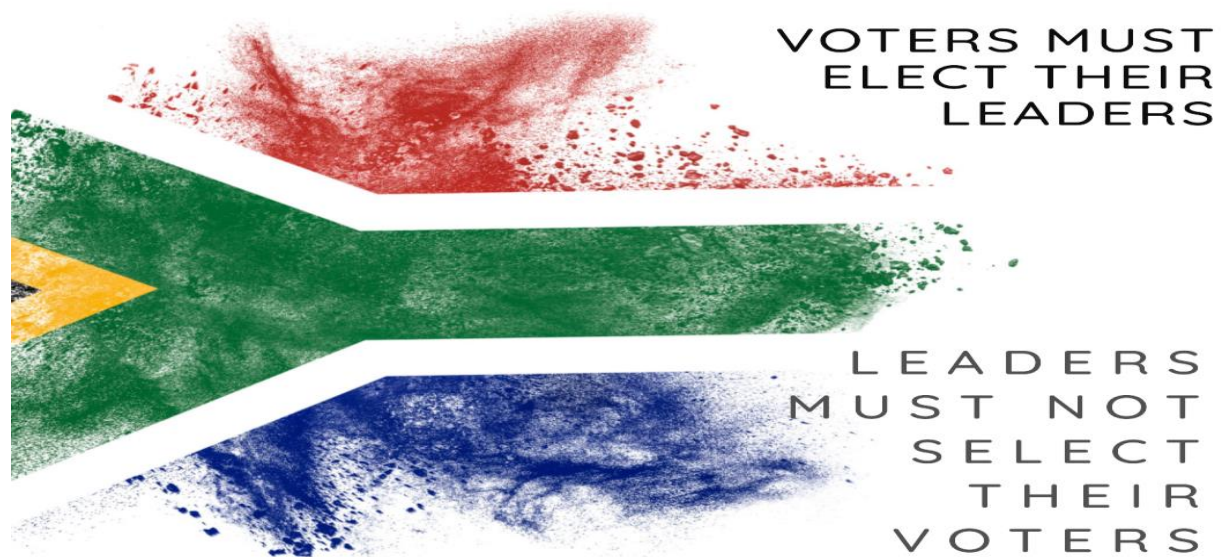
The reason is not necessarily that the referee will deliberately favour that team. The problem is that the independence of the contest has already been compromised. The players, supporters and spectators can no longer be confident that the rules will be applied impartially.

The same principle applies to elections.

The administration of an election requires independence from the contestants. That is why modern electoral systems place such emphasis on impartial electoral commissions, conflict-of-interest rules, transparent procedures and independent dispute-resolution mechanisms.

The administrator does not have to be proved corrupt before the arrangement becomes unacceptable. The structural conflict is sufficient. SAFA should be no different.

Manufacturing an electorate



There is another, more subtle consequence.

If individuals aligned to the incumbent leadership participate selectively in Regional and LFA electoral processes, the objective does not have to be the manipulation of a particular ballot.

The more consequential objective can be the selection of the people who will eventually cast the national ballots. This changes the nature of the electoral contest. Instead of attempting to influence the outcome at the final stage, the political contest is moved upstream. The composition of the electorate becomes the battlefield.

That is why the current pattern of interventions should be examined not as a series of isolated local disputes, but as part of the broader national electoral process.

An LFA elects its leadership → The LFA influences the composition of the Regional electorate
→ A Region elects its leadership → The Region influences the composition of the national electorate
→ That leadership participates in determining the representatives who ultimately participate in national governance.

Consequently, the manipulation of a local electoral process is not necessarily a local matter. It can have national electoral consequences. This is the essential connection that appears to be missing from much of the current discussion.

Selective intervention and the problem of consistency

The evidence emerging from the 2026 electoral cycle also raises a particularly serious question about the selective intervention of SAFA's national office.

In Newcastle LFA in KwaZulu-Natal, and in the ZF Mgcawu and Frances Baard Regions in the Northern Cape, SAFA head office intervened following complaints brought to its attention.

Yet in circumstances presenting materially similar concerns in Nelson Mandela Bay and Sarah Baartman in the Eastern Cape and Sedibeng in Gauteng, SAFA has not applied the same approach.

Since there is no constitutional foundation for SAFA officials' interference in Regional and LFA elections, the issue is not that SAFA must necessarily intervene in every complaint. The issue is consistency – for the right reasons.

If the Constitution, regulations or electoral framework authorise intervention – which it does not – the same rules should apply to comparable circumstances regardless of the political consequences.

If intervention is not authorised, then the absence of authority cannot be cured by the fact that national office considers intervention politically convenient in a particular case.

This is a basic principle of administrative justice and good governance: like cases should be treated alike, and decisions affecting members must be based upon established rules rather than political preference. Selective intervention creates an even more serious problem when those carrying out the interventions are politically aligned to one of the candidates in the national election.

At that point, the question is no longer simply whether SAFA has acted correctly in a particular Regional or LFA election. The question becomes whether national office is influencing the political composition of the national electorate.

The 2022 precedent

None of this should be surprising to observers who followed the 2022 electoral cycle closely.

The problems of that period were not confined to one controversial election or one disputed decision. They formed part of a wider pattern involving constitutional amendments, the

expansion of presidential powers, changes affecting Congress, interventions in Regional and LFA elections and the involvement of SAFA officials in electoral processes.

I wrote about those developments extensively after the 2022 election in my 2023 book *Red Card for a Stolen Victory*. The purpose of that book was not simply to criticise individuals or to revisit a presidential contest that had already ended. It was to document what happens when the constitutional architecture of an organisation is gradually altered in ways that concentrate power in the executive and weaken the institutions intended to constrain it.

The lesson from 2022 should have been straightforward. The solution to a disputed electoral environment is not to become better at controlling elections. It is to make the electoral system sufficiently independent that nobody can control it.

Unfortunately, the events now taking place suggest that precisely the opposite lesson may have been learned.

Constitutional manipulation and the concentration of power

One of the most significant developments preceding the 2022 election was the alteration of SAFA's constitutional framework in ways that materially strengthened the authority of the incumbent President while weakening the authority of Congress.

A constitution exists primarily to regulate and restrain power. That is its purpose. It establishes who may exercise power, how that power may be exercised, what its limits are and which body has the authority to hold another body accountable.

When the executive acquires the ability to expand its own powers while simultaneously reducing the authority of the body from which those powers are derived, the constitutional relationship is fundamentally altered.

The danger is not simply that one President becomes more powerful. The danger is that the organisation becomes increasingly dependent upon the personality and political authority of the incumbent.

That is how a voluntary association can begin to resemble what might be described as a constitutional monarchy: the constitutional structures remain in place, elections continue to take place and Congress continues to meet, but real authority becomes increasingly concentrated around one office and one political centre.

This is incompatible with the principles of institutional accountability and separation of powers.

Ownership and control

The inclusion of NEC members within the Congress electorate during the current electoral cycle raises a related governance concern. The distinction between those who exercise executive authority and those who constitute the organisation is not merely technical. It is central to accountability.

The NEC derives its authority from the constitutional structure established by Congress. Congress, in turn, is intended to provide the institutional mechanism through which the membership exercises ultimate authority over the association.

When members of the executive become part of the electorate that determines the composition of Congress, the distinction between ownership and control becomes blurred. This is a familiar problem in corporate governance. Those who manage an institution cannot simply redefine themselves as its owners. The principle is equally relevant to voluntary associations.

The executive should exercise authority on behalf of the membership, not acquire additional constitutional influence over the body to which it is accountable. This is why separation of powers is so important. It prevents the institution that exercises power from simultaneously becoming the institution that determines the source and limits of that power.

The CEO and the question of jurisdiction

Another issue from the previous cycle that has returned in the current environment concerns the intervention of SAFA's professional administration in Regional and LFA elections. There have been instances in which the SAFA CEO has purported to nullify elections at subordinate levels of the organisation. This raises a fundamental constitutional question:

Where does that power come from?

The answer cannot be that the CEO believed intervention was necessary. Nor can it be that SAFA head office considered the election unsatisfactory. In a constitutional organisation, every exercise of public or organisational power must have a legal or constitutional source.

The principle is elementary: no authority without jurisdiction.

If the Constitution assigns the power to nullify or overturn an election to a particular electoral or appellate body that power cannot simply be assumed by another office because the circumstances appear urgent. And if the constitution is silent on the matter, the power simply does not exist and cannot be exercised. Otherwise the constitutional allocation of authority becomes meaningless.

This is particularly dangerous in an election. The person or institution with the power to determine whether an election stands has enormous influence over who ultimately occupies office. That power must therefore be exercised strictly within the limits established by the governing rules.

The problem with staff intervention

There is also an important distinction between providing administrative support and intervening politically.

SAFA, as a national federation, inevitably has a legitimate administrative interest in ensuring that its affiliated structures conduct elections in accordance with the Constitution and applicable regulations. But that does not give SAFA staff an unlimited mandate to become participants in those elections.

The distinction between governance and management is fundamental. Governance determines policy, establishes rules and exercises oversight. Management implements those decisions.

When professional staff move from administering the organisation to influencing the political outcome of elections within the organisation, that boundary becomes blurred. The problem becomes even more acute where staff are acting under the direction or influence of elected officials who themselves are candidates in the national election.

The electoral process should be protected from such conflicts rather than exposed to them.

The illusion of a free and fair national election

This brings us to perhaps the most important point. An election observer arriving at the SAFA Congress in 2026 may see an election that appears entirely orderly:

- Delegates will be accredited.
- Ballots will be distributed.
- Candidates will make their final appeals.
- Votes will be cast.
- Votes will be counted.
- A result will be announced.

From a purely procedural perspective, everything may appear normal. But the observer will be seeing only the final stage of the electoral process. The observer may not have witnessed what happened in the months preceding Congress in the Regions and LFAs:

- They may not have seen which elections were challenged.

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- They may not have seen which complaints received intervention from national office.
 - They may not have seen which complaints were ignored.
 - They may not have seen who was sent to supervise or intervene in particular elections.
 - They may not have understood the political affiliations of those individuals.
 - They may not have seen the pressure experienced by candidates and office bearers at local level.
 - They may not have seen how the composition of the electorate was progressively shaped.

Consequently, an election can be perfectly orderly on election day while the process that produced that electorate was profoundly flawed.

This is why election observation that begins and ends on polling day is inadequate for a complex membership-based organisation such as SAFA. The integrity of an election must be assessed across the entire electoral cycle.

The manufacture of unanimity

There is another consequence that deserves attention.

If the electoral machinery succeeds in systematically producing a favourable composition of the electorate before the national Congress, the final result may appear to demonstrate overwhelming support for the incumbent.

That appearance can itself become a political weapon. The incumbent can point to the result and say: *Look at the overwhelming support*. Observers can point to the peaceful and orderly Congress and say: *The election was free and fair*.

But neither conclusion necessarily answers the prior question: Was the electorate itself freely and fairly constituted? An apparently united electorate may therefore be the product of a long process of political selection.

- The unity is real.
- The votes are real.
- The result is real.

But the political environment that produced them may have been manufactured. This is one of the most sophisticated ways in which institutional democracy can be weakened.

The ethical dimension

There is an ethical question here that extends beyond SAFA's statutes and regulations.

Every organisation that claims to be democratic accepts a moral obligation to provide its members with a genuine choice. That obligation does not disappear because the rules have been technically complied with.

Good governance requires more than legality. It requires integrity, fairness, transparency, accountability, independence and respect for the institutional rights of members.

A process can therefore be technically defensible and ethically indefensible. The fact that something can be done under an expansive interpretation of a rule does not necessarily mean that it should be done.

This distinction is particularly important for a national sports federation. SAFA is not simply a private political club. It is the governing body for football in South Africa. Its conduct influences thousands of clubs, players, coaches, referees, administrators and volunteers.

The standards applied within its governance structures therefore have consequences far beyond the individuals competing for office.

The Montesquieu lesson

Montesquieu's enduring contribution to constitutional thought was his recognition that power must be checked by power.

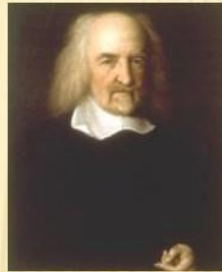
The principle is simple:

- The people who make the rules should not have unlimited authority to enforce them.
- Those who administer the rules should not determine their meaning whenever it suits them.
- Those who exercise executive power should not control the mechanisms designed to hold them accountable.
- And those contesting an election should not control the machinery that determines the electorate.

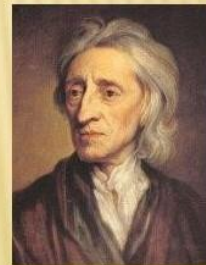
This is why separation of powers is not a luxury reserved for governments and parliaments. It is equally important in voluntary associations. Indeed, it may be even more important in organisations where political power is concentrated in relatively few hands.

HOBBS VS. LOCKE: ESSENTIAL CONCEPTS

- ✦ Concepts they share:
 - + The State of Nature
 - + Natural Rights
 - + The Social Contract
- ✦ Where they differ:
 - + What drives human behavior?
 - ✦ Passion (Hobbes)
 - ✦ Reason (Locke)
 - + What is the best form of government?
 - ✦ Absolute monarchy (Hobbes)
 - ✦ Constitutionalism (Locke)



Hobbes



Locke

The Locke lesson

John Locke's political philosophy provides another useful insight. Government derives its legitimacy from the consent of those who are governed. The same principle applies to an association such as SAFA:

- The President does not own SAFA.
- The NEC does not own SAFA.
- The CEO does not own SAFA.
- The administration does not own SAFA.

They exercise powers entrusted to them by the organisation's constitutional membership.

The moment those entrusted with power begin using that power to determine who may exercise the organisation's ultimate authority, the relationship between the governed and the governors becomes distorted.

The governors begin shaping the electorate that is supposed to govern them. That is precisely the kind of concentration of power that constitutional democracy is designed to prevent.

The question SAFA cannot avoid

The evidence now available from the 2026 electoral cycle requires SAFA members to ask a series of uncomfortable but necessary questions:

- Why are individuals who are openly campaigning for the incumbent President participating in elections that determine the composition of the national electorate?
- What safeguards exist to prevent conflicts of interest?
- Why has SAFA intervened in some Regional and LFA electoral disputes but not in apparently comparable cases elsewhere?
- What constitutional authority permits national office to intervene in or nullify subordinate elections?
- Why are professional staff being deployed into electoral environments in which the national leadership itself has a direct political interest?
- What mechanisms exist to ensure that Congress remains the ultimate constitutional authority?
- What protections exist for members who challenge decisions of national office?

And, most importantly:

Can an election genuinely be considered free and fair when one of the candidates has substantial influence over the machinery through which the electorate that will vote for that candidate is being constituted?

These questions are not attacks on personalities. They are questions about institutional design. They would be equally valid if the political identities of the individuals involved were reversed. That is precisely why they matter.

SAFA's long-term sustainability

There is a tendency in football politics to judge elections by their immediate outcome:

- Who won?
- By how many votes?
- Who lost?
- Which Provinces / Regions supported whom?

But an election is only one moment in the life of an institution. The more important question is what the electoral process does to the institution itself:

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- If Regions begin believing that their survival depends upon political allegiance to national office bearers, regional autonomy is weakened. And as recent interventions have demonstrated, that autonomy has now been destroyed.
 - If LFAs believe that their elections can be overturned by national office without clear constitutional authority, constitutional certainty is weakened.
 - If delegates believe that their political choices may have consequences for their organisations, freedom of association is weakened.
 - If electoral administrators are perceived to be aligned with particular candidates, confidence in the process is weakened.
 - If Congress gradually loses its authority, democratic accountability is weakened.

And when members eventually lose confidence in the fairness of the system, participation itself begins to decline.

This is how institutions become brittle and ultimately crumble into meaningless fragments:

- They may continue to function.
- They may continue to hold congresses.
- They may continue to elect office bearers.
- They may continue to issue regulations.

But the legitimacy that holds the institution together begins to disappear.

We have seen this movie before

That is why the titles of three of my books remain relevant.

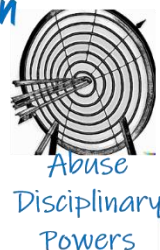
Our Football Is Broken: How to Fix South African Football's Dispute Resolution System; Red Card for a Stolen Victory and *More Than a Game: Football Governance Betrayed* were written because the problems confronting SAFA were never simply about football.

- They were about governance.
- They were about constitutionalism.
- They were about the relationship between power and accountability.
- They were about whether an institution established to serve its members could gradually become an institution in which members were expected to serve those who controlled it.

The events of 2026 provide an opportunity to determine whether the warnings contained in those books were understood or ignored. If the same methods are being repeated, then SAFA is not merely experiencing another contentious election. It is experiencing a failure of institutional learning. And that is far more serious.



How the **2026** SAFA Elections Are Being Stolen



Manipulate
the
constitution



Deploy
electoral
hitmen



Block
Disputes

The election must be protected before Election Day

SAFA does not need another election in which everyone waits until Congress to determine whether the process was legitimate.

- The electoral environment must be protected before the first ballot is cast.
- There must be independence between candidates and electoral administrators.
- There must be clear limits on the intervention of national office.
- There must be consistent treatment of comparable electoral disputes.
- There must be respect for the jurisdiction of electoral and appellate bodies.
- There must be transparency concerning who is sent to supervise elections and why.
- There must be meaningful protection for Regions, LFAs, clubs and individual members against arbitrary intervention.
- And there must be a clear separation between the executive authority of SAFA and the administration of its elections.

Most importantly, Congress must reclaim its position as the ultimate constitutional authority of the association.

The answer is not to determine which faction is right. The answer is to construct an electoral system in which neither faction can control the machinery of democracy.

That is the real test.

The choice before South African football

The 2026 election should therefore not be judged merely by the appearance of order on Election Day. It should be judged by the integrity of the journey that brought the delegates into that room. If that journey was free, transparent, impartial and constitutionally compliant, then the result deserves respect – whatever the result may be.

If, however, the electorate has been progressively shaped through politically selective interventions, constitutional manipulation, conflicts of interest and the deployment of partisan actors into local and regional electoral processes, then an orderly Congress cannot erase what happened beforehand.

The absence of visible disorder is not proof of electoral integrity. A peaceful election can still be an engineered election. And a landslide can still be the product of a process in which the electorate was selected long before the voters entered the room.

South African football deserves better:

- It deserves an election in which the incumbent is free to campaign, the challenger is free to campaign, the members are free to choose and the administrators are free from political allegiance.
- It deserves an election in which nobody controls the referee.
- It deserves an election in which the rules cannot be changed to suit the team that happens to be leading.
- And it deserves an election in which Congress is not merely the venue where a predetermined political outcome is formally announced, but the place where the sovereign membership of SAFA genuinely exercises its constitutional authority.

The issue before SAFA in 2026 is therefore much larger than who becomes President. It is whether the organisation will remain a constitutional football association governed by its membership, or whether it will continue moving towards a system in which power is concentrated, the electorate is curated and elections become the final confirmation of decisions made long before election day.

The warning signs were visible in 2022:

They were documented. They were analysed. They were written about. And now they are appearing again. The question is no longer whether SAFA has been warned.

The question is whether anyone is prepared to listen.