

## UK Introduces Tougher Oversight to Shield Football from Human Rights Abusers

August 1, 2025

— Categories: Human Rights



Download IPFS

The United Kingdom has enacted a reform in football governance aimed at reducing financial instability and preventing human rights abusers from acquiring English clubs. The Football Governance Act, which came into effect on July 21, establishes an Independent Football Regulator with authority to enforce stricter ownership standards and strengthen the integrity of the sport.

The legislation follows years of political debate and growing public concern over “sportswashing”, a term referring to attempts by authoritarian governments to use sports to improve their international image. High-profile acquisitions, including Saudi Arabia’s takeover of Newcastle United, the United Arab Emirates’ ownership of Manchester City, and Qatar’s investments in English football, have increased scrutiny. These deals often involve sovereign wealth funds closely tied to regimes with questionable human rights. The Independent Football Regulator will have broad powers, including conducting enhanced background checks on prospective club owners and directors. This aims to prevent individuals linked to criminal activity or serious rights violations from taking control of English football institutions. The new Owners and Directors Test replaces previous standards with a more rigorous process that evaluates both criminal convictions and foreign conduct that would constitute a “serious offence” under United Kingdom law, including terrorism, money laundering, or human trafficking.

The law also authorises the Regulator to assess the ongoing suitability of current owners, not only prospective ones. This ensures ongoing oversight and accountability, particularly in high-risk cases. While the law does not explicitly name individuals or governments, it addresses long-standing concerns raised by advocacy organisations, including Human Rights Watch. In 2020, the group warned the Premier League against approving the Saudi Public Investment Fund’s bid for Newcastle United, citing Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s control over the Fund, which holds assets reportedly exceeding \$700 billion.

The legislation reflects cross-party support for reinforcing ethical standards in sport, with backing from both previous and current governments. Prime Minister Keir Starmer has described the law as part of his vision for a “fairer future” for English football. The strengthened framework aims to preserve the sport’s cultural significance and economic health while limiting foreign influence from actors with poor human rights records.

While the law’s passage is seen as a milestone, questions remain over its enforcement, especially in cases where political or economic interests may conflict with regulatory decisions. The coming years will determine whether the UK consistently applies these new standards and resists pressures that could undermine its commitment to integrity in football governance.