

## UK Introduces Independent Football Regulator to Tackle Ownership Abuses

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– Categories: Human Rights



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In a landmark move aimed at safeguarding the integrity of English football, the United Kingdom has enacted the *Football Governance Act*, establishing an independent body to oversee the sport's regulation in England and Wales. Passed on 21 July, the legislation introduces new powers to address financial mismanagement, preserve clubs' cultural significance, and prevent individuals or regimes with records of human rights abuses from owning football teams.

The law comes in response to growing concern over foreign ownership in the Premier League, where state-backed entities from countries with questionable human rights records have increasingly gained control of clubs. Examples include Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund acquiring Newcastle United, the United Arab Emirates' control over Manchester City, and Qatar's expanding interest in English football. These developments have fuelled concerns about "sportswashing," where authoritarian governments use sport to improve their global image.

The Football Governance Act addresses these issues by introducing an *Independent Football Regulator* (IFR), tasked with implementing rigorous standards for club ownership and governance. One of the central tools of the IFR will be a reformed *Owners' and Directors' Test*, which now includes tougher measures aimed at barring unsuitable individuals and entities from gaining a foothold in English football.

The updated test scrutinises whether potential or current owners have criminal convictions or are subject to criminal proceedings, either in the UK or abroad. It further assesses whether individuals have engaged in activities that would be considered serious offences under UK law, such as money laundering, terrorism, or human trafficking, even if those acts were committed outside the country.

Of particular significance is the test's focus on suitability. The IFR is empowered to assess ownership not only based on legal grounds but also the broader character and conduct of individuals. This includes disqualifying those involved in human rights abuses, such as politically motivated imprisonment, systematic abuse of migrant workers, or violent acts against journalists.

The concerns raised by organisations such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) have played a role in shaping public and political discourse around the issue. In 2020, HRW urged the Premier League to scrutinise Saudi Arabia's human rights record during its review of the Newcastle deal. Although the deal was ultimately approved based on assurances that the Saudi government would not control the club, HRW has since argued that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman holds effective control over the Public Investment Fund, a claim backed by their investigations.

With the passage of the new legislation, the UK government has formally acknowledged the need for accountability and transparency in football ownership. While the law includes

provisions designed to prevent unsuitable owners from entering the sport, its long-term impact will depend on consistent enforcement.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer has framed the reform as part of his broader commitment to delivering a “fairer future” for football in the country. While the law marks a considerable step forward in protecting clubs and fans from exploitation, it also sets a precedent for other countries grappling with the influence of authoritarian regimes in sport.

Whether the UK government can maintain a clear line between regulatory integrity and foreign policy considerations remains to be seen. Nonetheless, the Football Governance Act lays down a crucial framework to uphold the values and reputation of English football in an increasingly globalised arena.