

'PFF chief asked FIFA president for mandate extension in meeting'

KARACHI: A picture is being painted. It's being shown that the world's football governing body FIFA is really pleased with the current status of the Pakistan Football Federation (PFF) since it lifted the ban on it in March. Sources privy to last week's meeting between PFF chief Faisal Saleh Hayat and FIFA president Gianni Infantino at the Home of FIFA in Zurich, however, are saying otherwise.

A day after the meeting last Tuesday, the PFF issued a press release in which it said that Infantino was committed to "completing three unfinished Goal projects" and that he "expressed his willingness to visit Pakistan in the near future". It also said that the FIFA chief had promised technical support to the country's football regulatory body to revise the PFF Statutes and prevent "political intervention in the future".

What it didn't mention, though, is that Hayat had asked Infantino for a three-year extension to his mandate. Hayat's meeting with Infantino came at a precarious time for him. Having already seen his influence in South Asia wane at a recent election of the South West Asian Football Association (SWAFF), he's also wary of the newly-elected Pakistan government that is potentially seeking to revive sports in the country.

"He told Infantino that he feels threatened by the new Pakistan government," several sources told IPP over the last week. "He said he sees government meddling in the PFF affairs if its presidential election were to be held in the near future. He's therefore asked FIFA to not push him to hold the

PFF election.”

The PFF issue will therefore be discussed when FIFA’s Member Associations Committee meets later this month. “Regarding the current situation of the PFF, the matter will be discussed by FIFA’s Member Associations Committee which is due to meet on September 26,” a FIFA spokesperson told IPP last week.

FIFA didn’t respond to a query by IPP on Monday, asking if the Member Associations Committee decided to discuss the Pakistan issue after Hayat’s demand for a term extension. “Further details will be provided in due course,” it had said in an earlier correspondence. Despite repeated attempts, the PFF spokesperson didn’t respond to a request by IPP to confirm or deny that Hayat had sought a term extension.

In September 2015, after a row broke out ahead of the PFF elections scheduled for June that year, FIFA had given Hayat a two-year mandate to ratify the PFF statutes and hold a fresh election. With the Supreme Court having appointed an administrator to run the country’s football affairs, FIFA banned the PFF in October 2017.

The ban was lifted once the PFF offices were returned to Hayat and under the orders of the SC, an election of the Punjab Football Association – which also fell into dispute in 2015 – was held. FIFA has strict rules on ‘third-party’ interference and IPP understands that an election held on the orders of the SC will not be acceptable to the world body. The SC has also ordered the PFF to hold its presidential election.

The two-year term Hayat was given back has long expired yet he remains the PFF chief without an election. His meeting with Infantino came hot on heels of a lost election last month. Running for the senior vice-president post of the newly formed SWAFF, he lost out to Maldives Olympic Committee chief Mohamed Shaeed.

Sources told IPP that Hayat had a long meeting with SWAFF

president Adel Ezzat, the former head of Saudi Arabian Football Federation, seeking his support as he ran for the post of senior vice-president. Ezzat left his role as Saudi Arabian football chief last month after announcing his bid to run for AFC president in next year's election.

With Ezzat having announced his candidacy for the AFC president, it promises to be an interesting few months till next year's election. Ezzat will naturally have an influence over the SWAFF members and for the PFF, it presents a predicament whether to side with him or with AFC president Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa.

The formation of the SWAFF earlier this year was welcomed by Infantino, who has fostered close links with the Saudi Football Federation. A key component of the Saudis' football power play is the SWAFF, which has promised infrastructure development to its members. The promise of more funding seems to have been key in gaining support.

For the PFF, however, there are infrastructure projects, especially several from FIFA's now-disbanded Goal Programme that remain unfinished. The PFF claimed last week that that Infantino had "agreed to not only complete the three unfinished such Projects including Sukkur, Jacobabad and Khanewal but also to install an artificial pitch at Khanewal".

IPP understands that with the Goal Bureau now closed, those projects could only now be completed through FIFA's new Forward Development Programme. But that is a long process in itself. And like PFF's other claims, including that of Infantino agreeing to come to Pakistan, FIFA is giving little away.

"In line with its Statutes, one of FIFA's key objectives is to promote football globally through youth and development programmes," FIFA's spokesperson told IPP. "As such, FIFA works with all its member associations to accomplish the said

objectives. The implementation of specific development projects is done in line with the FIFA Forward Regulations based on FIFA's Development Committee approval. Further details will be provided in due time."

For now, PFF's future hinges on what the Member Associations Committee decides. Sources familiar with the working of the committee have said that an election is likely to be ordered.