

Sports

Corruption-scarred Indonesia football grapples with a new match-fix scandal

Southeast Asian nation urged to tackle endemic problems

JAKARTA: Indonesian football's long-running struggle against corruption has been reignited with authorities promising a new crackdown after a senior official was caught trying to bribe a coach, the latest scandal in a league scarred by mismanagement and deadly hooliganism. But, dogged by years of match-fixing, violence and corruption rife at all levels of the game, analysts say the Southeast Asian country needs to do more than "lip service" to tackle the endemic problems.

Earlier this month an executive member of the Football Association of Indonesia (PSSI) resigned after a popular television talk show broadcast a recording of him offering the coach of Madura FC a bribe of approximately \$10,000 to throw a second division game. Hidayat, who like many Indonesians only uses one name, has been handed a three-year ban from football and fined by a PSSI disciplinary committee.

"Match-fixing exists everywhere, in league 1, 2 and 3. The problem is that the match-fixing issue has never been solved and (perpetrators) punished properly," football analyst Akmal Marhali told AFP. The PSSI announced the establishment of a special task force to address allegations of match-fixing following the

scandal, promising firm action against cheats. But critics like Marhali say there needs to be more than just "lip service" to solve a problem that so far seems to be out of the grasp of Indonesian authorities. "Perpetrators feel like they have impunity because there is no law enforcement," Marhali said.

'Open secret'

Allegations of match-fixing have swirled around Indonesian football for decades. Indonesian defender Mursyid Effendi was given a lifetime ban by FIFA after scoring a deliberate own goal in a Tiger Cup match against Thailand in 1998. The manager of Borneo-based Bontang FC, Camara Fode, received a lifetime ban for ordering his team to lose against PSLs Lhokseumawe, from Aceh, in a Premier League game in 2013. Players from both teams were also suspended.

The following year, several players from both PSS Sleman and PSIS Semarang were banned for life after scoring five deliberate own goals in the final minutes of the match to avoid a playoff clash. Long-time fans have become so used to mismanagement and corruption in the game that match-fixing is considered an "open secret", Dex Glenniza,

managing editor of website Pandit Football, told AFP. Players, referees, and club administrators are all involved in rigging matches, he said, adding that although gambling is illegal in Indonesia, fans often bet through international gambling websites or local bookies. Glenniza said funding shortfalls for player salaries and club operations, conflicts of interest within the PSSI and weak law enforcement have all made the game an "easy target" for crime syndicates. Azwan Karim, who served as secretary general of the PSSI between 2014 and 2016, said the PSSI could not tackle the problem alone. "The PSSI can only use its football judicial procedures," he said. "To have a deterrent effect in place, the government should be involved—the police especially."

History of problems

While it has a low international profile, Indonesia has attracted some Premier League players, including former Chelsea star Michael Essien and Tottenham Hotspur midfielder Didier Zokora. But Indonesian football has been tarnished on the global stage by a host of problems over the years—including months of unpaid wages and the deaths of at least two foreign players who were left unable to afford

medical care. An explosive row between the domestic association and government prompted FIFA to ban Indonesia from international competition in 2015. The ban lifted last year. As if to underline the game's struggle with corruption, former PSSI chairman Nurdin Halid once ran the organization from his jail cell where he was serving time on unrelated graft charges. Indonesia has in recent years also gained a reputation as Asia's most violent football nation.

In September, 23-year-old Persija Jakarta fan Haringga Sirla was clubbed to death by supporters of arch-rival Persib Bandung outside a stadium in the Javan city of Bandung. PSSI Vice Chairman Joko Driyono said the association had a zero tolerance approach to match-fixing, and was ready to work with law enforcement authorities on the issue. Yet, some observers of the Indonesian game are dubious this will result in firm action. "No more cherry-picking, anyone who breaks the ethical code and integrity of football must be punished," Marhali, who runs football watchdog Save Our Soccer, said. "The PSSI should no longer shield those who are involved in match-fixing—we know that some of those involved are PSSI members." — AFP

Juve juggernaut set to maintain record start against Roma

ROME: Cristiano Ronaldo was plastered all over the front pages of Italy's sports papers last weekend as the Portuguese talisman continued to take centre stage for Juventus as the side reached the latest landmark in a record-smashing start to the season. Gaining momentum since his high-profile move from Real Madrid in the close-season, the forward's penalty that sealed a 1-0 win for the Italian champions over local rivals Torino was also his new club's 5,000th Serie A goal.

The victory maintained their eight-point gap over second-placed Napoli and Massimiliano Allegri's side should make it to Christmas undefeated if they see off the challenge of struggling AS Roma on Saturday. The Turin derby victory was the latest evidence that this season's Juventus are not just a level above their rivals in this era, but on course to being considered one of the greatest Italian sides of all time. Juve have enjoyed domestic dominance for an extended period, winning seven league titles in a row and four consecutive Coppa Italia trophies, yet Ronaldo's arrival has helped them set a ferocious pace that has never been witnessed before.

The Turin side have made the best ever start to a Serie A season with 15 wins and a draw in 16 games, joining Manchester City (2017-18), Barcelona (2012-13) and Tottenham (1960-61) with the best openings to a campaign in Europe's top-five leagues. In Juventus' last five league games, they have traveled to AC Milan, Fiorentina and Torino, and hosted Inter and SPAL, winning all five matches without conceding a goal with a couple of Champions League group games added to the mix.

Some might argue that they have had some luck: Milan striker Gonzalo Higuain missed a penalty before being sent off, the post denied Inter, and Torino had strong penalty claims ignored. But rarely has a side had the aura of invincibility that Juventus have shown in the first half of this season. Roma's visit would have made



Juventus' Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo

for an exciting top of the table clash in seasons gone by, but with Allegri's juggernaut flattening all challengers and the capital club deep in crisis, the champions are big favourites to chalk up another win.

Coach Eusebio Di Francesco, his players and the club hierarchy were openly protested by their own fans during Roma's 3-2 win over Genoa last weekend, their first victory in six, and they travel to Turin a distant 22 points adrift of the leaders. "If anyone at the club is not committed to being part of a team effort, there's no place for them here," club president James Pallotta warned in a statement earlier this week. Earlier on Saturday, Napoli welcome SPAL and AC Milan host Fiorentina, before third-placed Inter, who ended a four-match winless run against Udinese last week, travel to bottom side Chievo, who continue to look for a first victory of the season. — Reuters

'Coal, football': Germany clubs honor last mine

DORTMUND: When Germany's last black coal mine shuts today, it is not just miners who may shed a tear—football fans too will mourn the end of a pillar of the nation's industrial wealth. "Coal, steel, football and beer are inseparable here, they permeate our culture and our community," said Borussia Dortmund chief executive Hans-Joachim Watzke ahead of the final shift in the mine at Bottrop at the heart of the Ruhr region. This industrial region—rich in coal, the basis German industry since the 19th century—is also the gritty home of some of Germany's best-loved football clubs.

"Without this mining history, we would not have the clubs we have today, which come directly from the world of mining," Manuel Neukirchner, director of the football museum in Dortmund, told AFP. Bundesliga clubs Dortmund and Schalke, the name of a suburb of the city of Gelsenkirchen, are the standard bearers of the densely populated Ruhr basin, colloquially known as the "Ruhrpott", that is home to five million people. Also here are Bochum and Duisburg, who currently play in the second division. Since World War II, the area has boasted seven professional clubs. In Europe, only London has a greater concentration of teams in such a small area.

The Bottrop mine lies 10.5 kilometers from Schalke's Veltins Arena. As a nod to their shared heritage, Schalke on Wednesday invited 2,000 miners for their Bundesliga match against Leverkusen and the name of one of the mine shafts was printed on the players' shirts. On Saturday, Dortmund players will take their turn to wear the thank-you message "Danke, Kumpel"—a word that in German means both "miner" and "buddy"—on their chests. "These tributes to a vanished world go straight to the heart of the fans," said Hartmut Hering, a local football expert. "For the clubs, it's 80 percent marketing and 20 percent conviction, but in the end everybody is a winner." — AFP