

Iraq-Iran football match prompts awkward silence from Tehran-backed politicians in Baghdad

Author:

Wed, 2019-01-16 22:28

BAGHDAD: A much-anticipated football match between Iran and Iraq on Wednesday ended in an anticlimactic 0-0 draw. But in Baghdad, the Asian Cup clash proved fertile ground for Iraqi fans to poke fun at the crisis-ridden new government and express their rejection of Iranian influence in their country.

Many criticized Iran-backed political leaders in the build-up to the match for remaining silent and not encouraging the Iraqi national team against Iran.

Some even accused forces sponsored by Tehran of supporting the Iranian team instead of their own national players.

The game in Dubai was played against the backdrop of a tense political stand off in Iraq between pro and anti-Iran parties.

Iran has sought to deepen its influence in Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. It supports armed factions and political parties, and increased its military involvement during the Daesh occupation of large parts of the country.

Iran-backed parliamentary blocs have been at loggerheads with rival groups for control of key government positions since an election in May.

Government figures and many MPs remained silent about the match, despite racing to encourage and congratulate the national team during previous games.

One senior Iraqi official told Arab News that the failure of some politicians to get behind the Iraqi team was "embarrassing".

"Most of our political leaders have been silent as they are all busy praying that the Iraqi team will not win," the official said. "How can they congratulate Iraqis on a victory against Iran?" he added sarcastically.

Fans were similarly bemused, posting scathing comments on social media.

"Today is the match between our team and the team of our lords," Jaafar Al-Kinani, wrote on his Facebook page. "We ask God to help us determine which team we have to support."

"I will support the referee. I cannot encourage any of the teams for fear of angering the other team," Mustafa Nassir, wrote on his page.

Other fans posted more sincere calls for Iraqis to get behind their team

despite the politics.

“All Iraqis will encourage the Iraqi team, even those close to Iran,” Ziyad Al-Dulaimaim, an activist from the Sunni-dominated western province of Anbar, wrote. “In 2007, our regions were under Al-Qaeda militants’ control and when the Iraqi team won the championship, everyone took to the street to celebrate, including the gunmen.”

Both Iraq and Iran had already qualified for the next round when they played on Wednesday. But a win against a strong team like Iran would have revived Iraqi hopes that they could reach the final.

In the build up to the match, many of the giant screens in Baghdad replayed previous Iraqi victories over Iran.

The last was in 2015 in the semifinal of the same tournament, when Iraq won in a penalty shootout.

Cafes and clubs prepared for the match by offering free entry for families and decorating their facades with Iraqi flags. Thousands of Iraqis watched the match outside on the streets.

Both Iraq and Iran have won the Asian Cup in recent years. Iraq famously won in 2007 just four years after the fall of Saddam Hussein in a victory that came as the country was wracked by violence.



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Iran ready for Iraq after beating Vietnam
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[Al-Azhar reinstates female student expelled over hug](#)

Tue, 2019-01-15 23:21

CAIRO: Egypt's Al-Azhar University on Monday reversed an earlier decision to expel a student after she was filmed hugging a male friend.

A video that went viral earlier this month shows a man bearing a bouquet of flowers, kneeling before a woman and then hugging her.

A university spokesman, Ahmed Zarie, said the woman was expelled because the video had sparked outcry and she had given the institution a "bad reputation."

But there was an intervention from the country's top cleric, Ahmed Al-Tayeb, who called on the university to reconsider.

He cited the student's age and her educational future, although he described her conduct outside campus as unacceptable and unbecoming.

Days later the university said it would scrap the punishment and instead stop her from sitting exams this term.

The woman protested her innocence. "I did not even know he would come (to the university)," she told local media Ahl Masr. "My friends asked me to close my eyes and when I saw him he had flowers. One of the students shot the incident and later I was surprised with what happened in the media."

The video was shot at Mansoura University in the north, where the man in the video is a student, according to news agency AFP.

"We are almost engaged and I won't leave her until we get married," said the man in a separate video. He was expelled from Mansour University for two years over the hug.

The hugging video, and the reaction to it, prompted a debate online and also the hashtag "love is not a crime."

One of the most popular tweets supported the woman.

“I am supporting the female student in Mansoura. I am ready to defend her, and I have many colleagues who will fight against her expulsion decision,” said lawyer Mohamed Abdel Aziz.

Another tweet, from Ahmed El-Sonbaty, said: “Love is not a crime but a blatant act and wrongdoing is a crime.”

One social media user asked why only the woman was being blamed, condemning society and the media’s double standards and hypocrisy.

“It’s all nonsense!” tweeted Youmna Sheta, from Mansoura. “Public and talk shows labeled the poor girl to be ‘the hug girl’ while they left the guy without a label! As if the hug is an action taken by only one person!”

She said that students were being targeted while other groups, who published photos that featured hugging and drinking, were left alone.



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Egypt’s top cleric urges rethink over student expelled for hug Pope embraces Al-Azhar imam in sign of renewed relations

Police fire tear gas to disperse protesters in Khartoum

Author:

Tue, 2019-01-15 22:58

KHARTOUM: Crowds of people chanting "Peace, justice, freedom" returned to the street in the Sudanese capital on Tuesday as authorities deployed hundreds of police to disperse them, witnesses said.

They said police fired tear gas to disperse the protesters in Khartoum.

Deadly protests have rocked Sudan since Dec. 19 when angry demonstrators rallied in towns and villages against a government decision to raise the price of bread.

At least 24 people have died in the protests, which swiftly turned into nationwide anti-government rallies in which demonstrators called on President Omar Bashir to step down.

On Tuesday, men and women gathered in the capital's southern business district of El-Kalakla, witnesses said.

They chanted "Peace, freedom, justice" and "We are fighters, we will achieve our mission."

Reinforcements joined riot police who had already deployed in the district and other areas of Khartoum and its twin city of Omdurman after organizers called for anti-government rallies.

The Sudanese Professionals' Association (SPA) that is spearheading the rallies have urged protesters to continue with their near daily demonstrations this week, calling it as the "Week of Uprising."

Rights groups say more than 1,000 people have been arrested since the protests began, including opposition leaders, activists and journalists as well as demonstrators.

Although the unrest was triggered by the rise in the price of bread, Sudan has faced a mounting economic crisis in the past year, including an acute shortage of foreign currency.

Repeated shortages of food and fuel have been reported across cities, while the cost of food and medicine has more than doubled.

Once seen as the breadbasket of the Arab world, the protesters say that many years of mismanagement have turned Sudan into a failed state.

They blame Bashir for South Sudan's secession and for Sudan being placed on a US list of countries that sponsor terrorism.

The opposition comprises several political parties whose leaders are in Sudan, and several armed groups led mainly from abroad or from conflict zones in southern or western Sudan.

Members of opposition parties have joined the protests, which are mainly led by the SPA. With a weekly program of demonstrations circulated on social media, the SPA has eclipsed the traditional opposition parties.

Bashir is the head of the Islamic Movement party, which has a similar ideology to the global Islamist organization, the Muslim Brotherhood.

He also has direct control over security forces, including the feared Rapid Support Force comprising former militias loyal to the ruling party, which he has often used to crush dissent.

But his position has been eroded by the economic crisis that sent inflation soaring to around 70 percent.

Bashir's supporters fear the protests may embolden small but influential factions within the ruling party who oppose changing the constitution to allow the president to seek a new term in office in 2020.



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Sudan protests will not change government: Bashir Hundreds rally in Sudan's capital for Al-Bashir's ouster

Palestinians strike against social security law

Author:

Tue, 2019-01-15 22:43

RAMALLAH: Thousands of Palestinians in the occupied West Bank joined a strike on Tuesday against their government's proposed new social security law, fearing the fund will be mismanaged.

Much of Ramallah, Hebron and other Palestinian cities remained closed.

A few thousand people protested outside the Social Security Corporation in Ramallah, where Abbas' government is based.

Under the proposed system both private employers and their employees would pay monthly into a government-managed fund, with employees receiving a pension when they retire.

The government says it will provide new security for employees, arguing similar systems exist in countries across the globe.

Protesters say they do not trust the Palestinian government to manage the fund and point out there are no guarantees.

They also say Israel's occupation of the West Bank means that the long-term existence of the Palestinian Authority government is far from secure.

Israeli soldiers have carried out repeated raids inside Ramallah in recent weeks, including near Abbas' headquarters, following two deadly shootings.

Amer Farah, who works at Bank of Palestine in Ramallah, said that in functioning states the social security laws were important to protect citizens' futures.

"But we are still under occupation, and there is no contact between parts of the country," he told AFP, alluding to the decade-long split between the West Bank and Gaza, where Abbas' rivals Hamas are in control.

"The country is not stable, neither economically nor politically. How will they implement the law?"



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Palestinians, Israeli police scuffle at Jerusalem holy site
Palestinians protest in Ramallah over Gaza sanctions

[Palestinians take over as chair of UN developing countries](#)

Author:

By EDITH M. LEDERER | AP

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Tue, 2019-01-15 (All day)

UNITED NATIONS: Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas took over as head of the key group of developing countries at the United Nations Tuesday with a promise to confront “assaults” on multilateralism and a pledge to seek a peaceful two-state solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Abbas accepted the chairmanship of the Group of 77, a coalition of 134 mainly developing nations and China, on behalf of Palestine, which is a non-member observer state of the United Nations. He was handed the gavel by Egypt’s

Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry, the outgoing chairman, with a handshake and kisses on both cheeks.

Before the ceremony, Abbas reiterated to reporters in Arabic that the Palestinians will seek full UN membership but gave no timetable.

The 193-member General Assembly had to approve a resolution enabling the Palestinians to chair the G77 because Palestine is a non-member state. It did so in October over objections from Israel and its closest ally, the United States.

During the annual gathering of world leaders at the General Assembly in September, ministers of the G77 formalized their decision to give Palestinians the chair, in a boost to Abbas' push for statehood and full UN membership.

In his acceptance speech, Abbas said the G77 will strive to ensure the rights and development of all people living under foreign and colonial occupation. "Palestine cannot be an exception," he said. "We also suffer under the yoke of foreign occupation."

Abbas said "Israel's continued colonization and occupation of the state of Palestine undermines our development ... and obstructs cohesive future development for all peoples of the region."

When the G77 was established in 1964, Abbas said its founding principles were connected with the principles and goals of the United Nations "and constitute the strongest pillar for upholding the multilateral system and its institutions as well as the rule of international law and mutual cooperation."

He warned "of the assaults under way against this system" and said the Palestinians will strive during their chairmanship of the G77 "to confront such challenges through the preservation of the multilateral international order."



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