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FEATURES

Infantino's African mess

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Gianni Infantino campaigned heavily in Africa to reach his goal: To get the unknown Ahmad Ahmad elected as Caf president. Now the Fifa president desperately trying to put out the fire he started without burning himself.

By Philippe Auclair and Pål Ødegård

Last week the African football confederation (Caf) announced that it had asked Fifa to intervene in its affairs, and that the Fifa secretary general, the Senegalese Fatma Samoura, had been assigned as a sort of ‘high commissioner’ with a mandate to clean up the mess within the next six months. It’s the first time Fifa do this on a confederation which by its own statutes is autonomous. It follows a series of scandals within Caf, forcing Fifa president Gianni Infantino to take unprecedented measures in order to contain a chain reaction he himself set in motion.

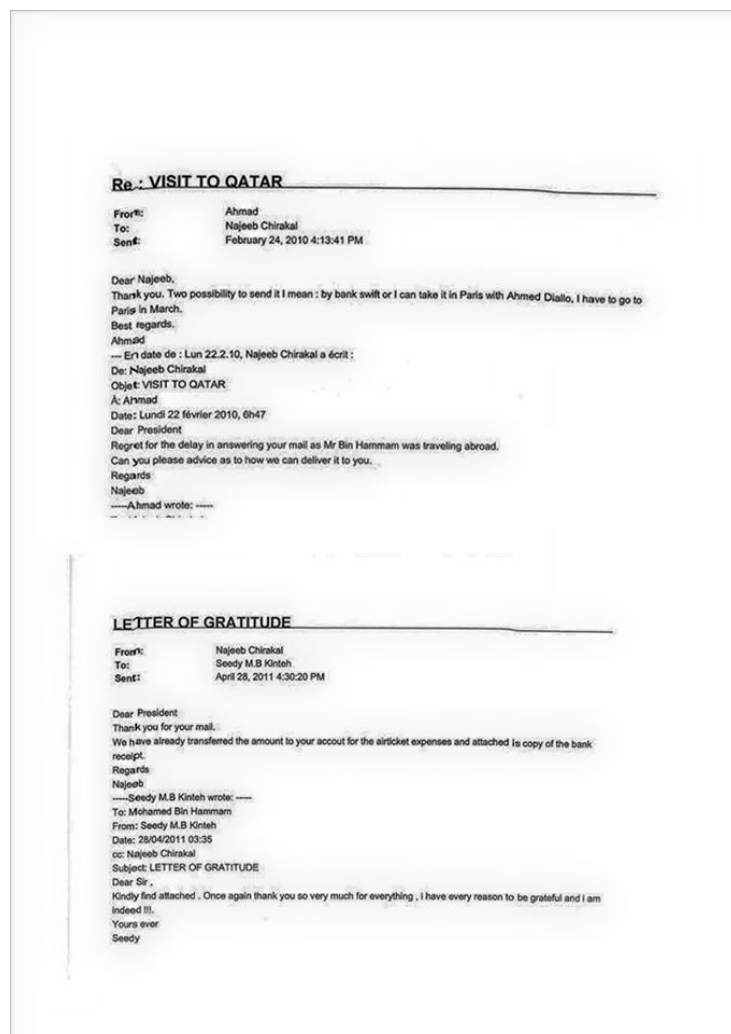
The Silence of the Lambs

July 2017

An unusually relaxed mood among Caf delegates was palpable in Skhirat, a small resort town between Rabat and Casablanca on the Mediterranean coast of Morocco. Caf symposiums – the first of their kind in the history of African football – were about to be concluded. Everyone was happy and excited, as they finally were able to speak on a wide range of topics, something they hadn’t been able to do during the former president Issa Hayatou’s autocratic 29-year long reign. The then 70-year old Cameroonian had been looking forward to another coronation – his eighth – at the presidential election earlier in March of the same year at the Caf congress in Addis Ababa. In the run-up to it, he had killed in the bud a proposal to implement an election for the top seat. But he was surprisingly beaten by the Caf executive committee

silent member, the Malagasy politician Ahmad Ahmad, by a margin which would have been unthinkable a few months beforehand – 34 votes to 20.

He's also known as 'Ahmad Darw', the name which cropped up in the so-called 'Qatargate' documents procured by the Sunday Times, and suggested that, back in 2010, he'd asked disgraced AFC President Mohammed bin Hammam for financial help (the amount of which is unclear) to fund his campaign for reelection at the head of the Madagascar FA – money that could be paid “by bank swift or I [Ahmad] can take cash] in Paris”.



Ahmad hadn't accomplished the feat and in fact, he didn't even contemplate running until persuaded by people much more influential than himself, as Josimar revealed from the **said election**. As one Caf official told Josimar:

“I'm perfectly sure it was Gianni [Infantino] who had the idea to put him forward. No one within Caf took him for a man of any significant influence. He never spoke up during executive meetings in the four years leading up to the election in Addis Ababa.”

In other words, before the election took place on 16 March 2017 in Ethiopia, Ahmad had appeared to be the man least likely to challenge Hayatou, the almighty president. Yet, helped by Infantino's backroom staff, who were there in force to advise him

push his candidacy in Addis Ababa, regardless of what the Caf and Fifa statutes have to say about such interference, the rank outsider won, and the consensus African football would change as a result. 'Change' was a word commonly used in Ethiopia as the verdict of the election became clear, to such an extent that just mentioning the word was enough to bring out enthusiastic smiles and dreaming from most of those involved in football on the continent. Ahmad's victory was unprecedented in African football history. Every president up until then had been groomed by his predecessor. Moreover, Issa Hayatou had become Fecafoot (Cameroonian football association) secretary general as a 28-year old in 1974, the year João Havelange won the Fifa presidency by winning influence in Africa, gathering supporters among hitherto neglected member associations as he beat the apartheid supporting and acting Fifa president Sir Stanley Rous from England.

No one was too clear as to what exactly this 'change' would mean, however. But Ahmad's manifesto at least, the future seemed rosy and dynamic in comparison to the iron rule of Hayatou. "Those who have lost their trust, their confidence in Caf, those who have been long forgotten and those who have been left on their own – they must join Caf," was among the promises laid out in a text focusing on improved governance and inclusion. And it seemed he meant business as several symposia were scheduled in July of the same year in Morocco, the hosts paying one half of the expenses, while Caf itself took care of the other.

It seemed everyone was included. Reporters, former players, marketers, kit suppliers, media moguls and football agents. Even the Qataris had sent a delegation, and president Gianni Infantino made a brief appearance, praising the initiative. Perhaps most notably, a separate symposium was held in Marrakech, focusing solely on the neglected issue, the improvement of women's football on the continent. Another

symposium, at which working groups brought all kinds of suggestions for improvement in men's football, took place simultaneously in the small beach resort of Skhira west of the capital Rabat. It was in Rabat that Caf's executive committee would meet the following day, having promised to discuss and vote on some of the proposals by these working groups.

As the symposiums concluded in the late afternoon of 19 July 2017, the participants were sent in cars and buses to a dinner party at the extravagant Royal Nautique Bouregreg near Salé, just east of Rabat, close to its international airport. As they stepped off the vehicles, hundreds of dancers, musicians and hostesses in traditional dresses greeted them as they strolled over the traditional hand-woven carpets to the canapé-laden tables. There everyone mingled until Fifa secretary general Fatma Samoura made her appearance in the manner of a regent, dressed in her characteristic Senegalese attire, flanked on one side by Caf ExCo member and vice-president Mohamed Omari and by Caf President Ahmad on the other. Those who had filled their stomachs with the tasty canapés would regret it, as the waiting staff produced exquisite snacks in abundance, which were followed by seven main courses, including whole-roasted lamb, one for each table of six to eight persons. While devouring the extravagant culinary feast, the guests were entertained by a 30-member band of local music and dancers. Ahmad himself gave a speech during the dinner, thanking the Moroccan government and his football federation for their hospitality as the guests struggled to get a taste of everything on offer. Yet, no doubt all present were impressed by what the Moroccan government had put together in their honour.

November 2017

Four months later, the Caf executive committee members were back in Morocco

another meeting. It seemed the Caf leadership had fallen in love with the count

The first had, as mentioned, also been held in Rabat, in July 2017, right after the symposiums, while a second took place in the Ghanaian capital Accra in September without exception, expressed enthusiasm for the beginning of a new era, an era in which everyone had a voice without fearing repercussions or exclusions. “Now it is truly democratic,” one ExCo member said before entering the session.

Ahmad opened the meeting by stating again how thankful he was towards the hosts in Morocco, as well as the Fédération Royale Marocaine de Football and its president Lekjaa (also Caf’s third vice-president), for having assisted Caf in hosting and organizing the symposiums. Gratitude was also expressed towards Caf’s first vice-president Nyantakyi and Nigerian FA boss Amaju Pinnick for having delivered Aiteo as a sponsor for the upcoming Caf Awards on a short deadline after the original sponsor Glo had pulled out. Ahmad also noted that the new deal was more than twice as lucrative for Caf.

After stating that he had been invited to meet several heads of states, he went on to mention that, as he had promised in his election manifesto, a renegotiation with the rights holders Lagardère Sports was on the agenda before announcing that his successor general had been appointed, after consultation with a recruitment firm. In addition, deputies would also have to be appointed. In that regard, he added: “What I say in this respect, is my philosophy (*sic*). Statutorily, the directors come under the secretariat general’s jurisdiction. It’s up to him to offer them to me. I’m not imposing anything on him. Because it is he who is responsible before us (...). There is no hypocrisy. That shall be his area of competence and he shall assume before the executive committee as president.”

The secretary general in question was the Egyptian Amr Fahmy, a founder of the Ahly ultras, 34-years old at the time, and the third of his name to hold the position. Both his grandfather (Mourad Fahmy, Caf secretary general from 1961 to 1982) and father Moustapha (Caf secretary general from 1982 to 2010) had succeeded him in the Egyptian dynasty. He'd been working for Lagardère Sports for a couple of years, a company which had agreed a twelve-year media rights agreement with Caf just before Issa Hayatou had to step down. This agreement had been challenged by the Egyptian Competition Authority (ECA), which had accused Issa Hayatou and the outgoing secretary general Hicham El Amrani – a Moroccan – of unfair treatment in the bidding process.

The executive meeting went on with deliberations on items such as the raise of allowances for referees, and which external audit firm would be performing inspections on Cameroon's readiness to host the African Nations' Cup (AFCON) in 2019 (which eventually was taken away from them). Then the meeting came to item number 10 on the agenda: "the report on the meeting of the organising committee of the African Nations' Championship [2018] (also known as CHAN, and not to be confused with the more famous AFCON. The CHAN, a biennial tournament in which only players from their national leagues are eligible to play was introduced in 2007) held in Rabat Morocco from November 2017."

As the headline in the minutes suggested, that meeting had taken place two days previously. A summary was now passed around to the executive committee members. It is worth noting that Kenya had initially been designated as hosts, but that, at the executive committee meeting which took place in Accra in September, the decision had been taken to strip the Kenyans of the tournament, and hand it over to Morocco. The Moroccans were more than ready to take over, despite the fact that they would

have less than four months to prepare before the opener on 13 January 2018. A to allow participating teams to include two to three players who didn't play in t national league, but plied their trade elsewhere on the African continent, had b tabled by a commission consisting of Leodegar Tenga (Tanzania), Tarek Boucha (Algeria), Kalusha Bwalya (Zambia) and Kwesi Nyantakyi (Ghana). It did not go down with Constant Omari (Democratic Republic of Congo), who argued it was the very essence of the tournament's nature, which was to only include players were active in their respective national leagues. Nyantakyi pointed out that sin were only two months until the opening match, it would be prudent to wait, wh was the conclusion of the commission.

After this was agreed upon, Suleiman Waberi of Djibouti came with a plea to lif financial penalty imposed on his federation, after their national team had with from playing the second leg of a play-off to the tournament. Here Ahmad interi point out that no member of the executive committee could speak about an issi concerning the association they represented. "The penalties, taken in accordan the regulations, are therefore maintained," the last sentence on the issue in the minutes stated.

And, like that, the committee members moved on to a topic which would have enormous consequences for Caf and the presidency of Ahmad. A sub-header in minutes read "Decision on the equipment of CHAN." The acting secretary gene the lead on this topic, pointing out the short time they had to secure equipmen 'referees' outfits, footballs, official delegation kits and so on." The problem was there was no long-term, fixed agreement in place with any kit supplier since th contract with Adidas had expired in 2016, something which the secretary gener blamed on "administrative delays."

The minutes read on as follows:

“The acting secretary general sets out the difficulty in concluding the purchase of equipment to be used for CHAN. In particular, the referees’ outfits, the footballs, the kits for the delegation and so on. In particular because of administrative delays, and this, although a \$3.5m budget for the purchase of equipment had been agreed at the ordinary general assembly [which took place] in Addis Ababa. As Caf no longer has a contract with its official equipment supplier.”

“The president of Caf notes that, [in order to respect] the principle of transparency, a \$3.5m budget demands an invitation to tender. However, with regard to the completion of the deadlines, he informed [the ExCo members] that he had anticipated this problem by meeting with the representatives of the Adidas company in Cairo, to find out if they would submit an offer in relation with Caf’s needs. [As he] had perceived with the various exchanges he’d had [with ExCo members] that their preference went towards Adidas or PUMA.”

“The President said he had also discussed this matter with the Chairman of the Finance Committee [Fouzi Lekjaa], whose [national] football federation is sponsored by Adidas, to find if he could help him find an emergency solution. All these steps have yet to be completed.”

“The Executive Committee confirmed [its] preference for Adidas equipment and gave the President a mandate to finalise the procurement process, reaffirming that an invitation to tender should be open for that purpose in the future.”

These were all the points noted as significant on the matter by the media officer in charge of recording the minutes. These minutes went onto the remaining items on the agenda, some of them trivial, others more significant, a couple spanning several pages in the document.

Yet, in hindsight, it is these four short paragraphs that precipitated a chain of events that would have unforeseeable, catastrophic repercussions on Caf and its president. A chain of events which are still unfolding in the summer of 2019, the last and most significant of which must be Caf's unprecedented, some would say humiliating, request to Fifa to interfere in their own matters, in the manner of a Soviet satellite state on the Red Army to restore order. As a result, Caf is to be placed under the de facto tutelage of Fifa's General Secretary Fatma Samoura from 1 August onwards – in principle, as the move has disgruntled many, chief among them the Uefa President Alexander Čeferin.



Fatma Samoura

Fatma Samoura: the former UN resident commissioner in Madagascar for five years during a period of severe political upheaval on the island. A period which saw Fifa presidential candidate Gianni Infantino make a visit to *La Grande Île* in order to garner support for his bid. A period during which Ahmad, one of Madagascar's great political survivors, wielded power far beyond an almost invisible member of Caf's Executive Committee. Ahmad, who'd become a government minister, then a vice-president of the Madagascar Senate during those momentous years, as well as the immovable president of the country's FA.

The executive meeting in Rabat had four absentees: Lydia Nsekera of Burundi, Djibrine of Chad, Hany Abou Rida of Egypt, and Musa Hassan Bility of Liberia. The latter would eventually compose a letter to Caf, earlier this year with questions about what really went on regarding, among other alarming issues, the president's so-

the problem of the CHAN kits. So far, he has been the only executive member to raise his voice publicly on the matter.

Hours after the meeting concluded, Josimar spoke to a member of the Executive Committee who was present. The CHAN issue was not mentioned. Rather, the E member expressed elation at how members now could discuss issues openly, so unthinkable under Hayatou's administration. Yet, there was also a hint of concern. A member noted. Ahmad indeed let the others speak their minds; but he would cut them off eventually to end a debate, made a quick decision, using a tone of voice that suggested that his word was final. Then he would simply move onto the next item on the agenda. Were these the first indications that perhaps Ahmad wasn't the new hope many had risked their career for to get elected? Perhaps he had acted like that because he found the meetings too long and tedious, just longing to go back to his private chambers for some personal recreation? And hadn't there been some rumour about a ruckus at the symposiums opened, when a female public relations officer in charge of arranging the event had been led away by security guards after a very heated argument with the Caf president?

Yet, no one at the meeting seemed to have found it peculiar that the president had asked to take over the handling of securing equipment for an imminent tournament without more questions. Perhaps they also just wanted to move on with the meeting before retiring to the luxurious recreational areas of Hotel Sofitel Jades Roses in Rabat's upscale suburb. Areas where Infantino's most trusted advisor, personal attaché Mattias Grafström and the Fifa president's old friend since his university days, and currently Fifa development director in charge of the Caribbean Football Union and Caf, the Congolese Veron Mosengo-Omba made sure every concern, no matter the slightest concern were taken care of.

The Idiots

December 2017

“I feel like an idiot!”

Harald Höfer, PUMA’s Senior Manager Teamsport for Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa, had every right to feel confused. Very confused. Like an idiot, even. He had managed to – somehow – find the means to answer Caf’s eleventh-hour request for thousands of items of football equipment, a matter of weeks before the African Championship of Nations (CHAN) was due to kick off in Casablanca on 13 January. The whole of the order had to be delivered by 10 January. Most factories would be closed during the Christmas period, and so were the order books of all other major suppliers, Nike and Adidas included. But he’d done it.

It was not just the matter of placing an order worth over €200,000 with the world’s second-largest football body. It must have crossed Höfer’s mind that this also represented a splendid opportunity to use this last-minute deal as a springboard for the first step towards establishing a new commercial relationship with the African Football Confederation, for so long of preserve of PUMA’s arch-competitor, Adidas, who had just ended to their partnership a year previously. That he’d agreed to throw in a 60 per cent discount when Caf would probably have accepted far less generous terms, showed he meant, well, business. Thanks to the hard work of Höfer’s team, the equipment would be ready in time – with one exception: a pair of size 49-50 shoes for Congo. Caf Executive Council and Fifa Council member Constant Omari.

But all of this work had come to nothing. He’d received that call from Caf’s Marketing and TV Manager Sarah El Gazzar on the morning of Monday 18 December, a mere five days after the deal had been finalised, followed by a frantic exchange of emails between the PUMA executive and Caf senior staff, including Finance Director Mohammed

Sherei and General Secretary Amr Fahmy. It had nothing to do with the size of feet. The order had been cancelled, just like that.

One of the first questions, if not the first, to cross Höfer 's mind, was “why?” Amr Fahmy too was nonplussed. Procuring equipment for the confederation's camp was part of his remit as Caf's General Secretary, a position he'd occupied for less than a month. He'd just received an email from El Gazzar which read: “In reference to the president's request to cancel the PUMA order below, I communicated with Mr Hachimi on the phone who is expecting an official email from the Caf SG regarding this matter. He explained that a cancellation fee will be requested.” The punctuation was not up to El Gazzar's usual standard, but the message was clear: the order had come directly from Ahmad.

Still, Fahmy was not satisfied. He'd sent a personal message of congratulations to El Gazzar on her successful brokerage of the PUMA deal on 15 December. And now, the order had been cancelled. He immediately asked his Deputy Secretary General, the Moroccan Essadik Alaoui, for an explanation. Alaoui responded in a matter of minutes:

“I confirm that this has been the president's [i.e. Ahmad's] request to cancel this order and to consider adidas (sic) new proposal”.

Alaoui continued:

“Nevertheless, we shall need from Sarah [El Gazzar] to give us the same quotation (detailed list) to forward to adidas (sic) this morning [18 December] so it can be comparable.”

But, as Fahmy, El Gazzar and everyone else who'd been involved in the search for an emergency kit supplier knew, there had been no “new proposal” by Adidas. The

couldn't have been, since Caf and the German manufacturer had parted ways a previously. When approached by the Confederation's Marketing department, they responded "no can do," just as their powerful subsidiary Adidas Egypt had done had no available stock at hand. Adidas confirmed this to us during our investigation: no new deal had been struck between the two organisations at any stage since the one expired in December 2016.

This did not prevent Ahmad's PR company, when approached by the BBC and J to repeatedly refer to the "Adidas deal" in relation to the agreement that was struck after the PUMA debacle. As if the German manufacturer itself had been directly involved in the supply of Adidas-branded equipment for the 2018 CHAN – and Caf competitions throughout 2018 and 2019, as we found out. It hadn't. The tale Ahmad had said he'd held with Adidas representatives in Cairo prior to the Rab meeting in November 2017 had come to nothing.

Moreover, contrary to what the Ahmad camp claimed in their response to our questions, it was not Amr Fahmy himself who'd told PUMA that the deal had been annulled: Sarah El Gazzar, acting on direct instructions from Ahmad, had broken news to Höfer on the telephone. The email correspondence we had access to indicated that, in fact, Fahmy had been kept out of the loop to the extent that, quite over the turn of events, he managed to cancel, re-activate and cancel the deal again in a matter of hours, apologising profusely, trying to placate an increasingly incomprehending and frustrated Höfer. "Due to organizational matters we had to cancel out at the last minute," the Egyptian wrote. But that those matters were, he seemed incapable to say.

Höfer was not amused. He'd sacrificed part of his Christmas holiday and recalled personnel in the PUMA sales department and warehouses to get the products re-

would have to stump up 50 per cent of the net price – €105,108.40 to be precise – late cancellation fee, which Fahmy readily accepted to pay, instructing Caf Fina Director Mohammed El Sherei to see to it. In fact, Höfer could have asked Caf to pay the full amount, as he later reminded El Sherei, who'd had the cheek to ask PUMA for "related proofs of this high demand of payment," and, in a separate email, blamed "circumstances beyond our will" for this holy mess. The "our" obviously didn't refer to the man who'd personally seen to the cancellation – president Ahmad.

What little patience the PUMA executive had shown until then had completely evaporated on the evening of 20 December. He sent a six-line email to Amr Fahmy, greeting, valediction and signature included. He'd had enough.

"...what can I say I'm speechless now? (sic)
I feel like an idiot!"

Höfer's next email, to Mohammed El Sherei this time, was even shorter.

"another question why did you cancel the order?
I never had a feedback?"

Only one person could really answer that question. Ahmad Ahmad.

This is the first of several instalments. More to follow in the next few days.

Any information you want to share with us?

Email: aajosimar@protonmail.com



Fotball er så mye mer enn bare at
22 spillere kjemper om ballen.

**Støtt vårt arbeid
- bli abonnent nå**



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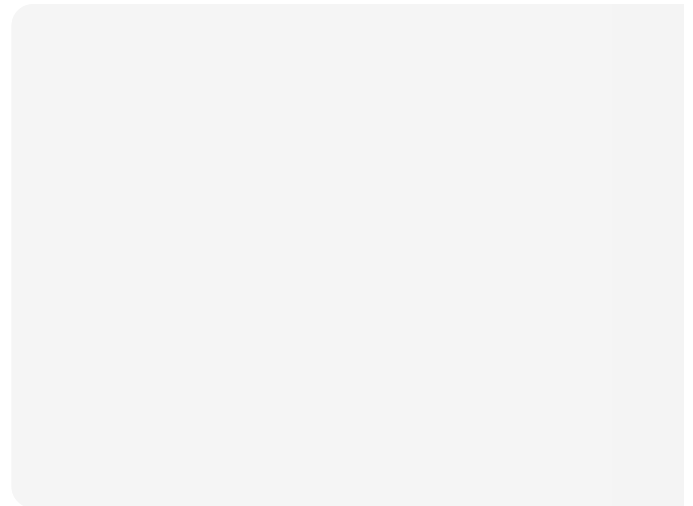
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SECRETS AND LIES

25/06/2019



AGENT SOLBAKKEN'S U-TURN

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