

Bangladesh and Argentina United by Football: Soft Power and Diplomacy

By Nahian Salsabeel¹

Football as a sport has long enraptured the hearts and souls of millions of Bangladeshi people. Being one of the most watched sports by entertainment consumers in the nation-state, it is no surprise that football fans dedicate themselves to supporting their favorites once every four years when the FIFA World Cup takes place. While it has been a topic of some conflict and violence among certain fanbases in Bangladesh, recent viral images and videos of a sea of its football fans watching the Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup match between Argentina and Mexico has stirred some praise for South Asian country's enthusiasm for football. This immense passion for the Argentinian team captured the attention of FIFA, as it tweeted cheers from Bangladeshi fans following Messi's goal, and the Argentine national football team, which extended its appreciation for the fanbase via an appreciative tweet²: "Thank you for supporting our team!! They are crazy like us!"

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² Tamjidul Hoque "Argentina and Bangladesh: two nations united by football." The Daily Star. 3 December 2022. Available at: <https://www.thedailystar.net/shout/news/argentina-and-bangladesh-two-nations-united-football-3186436>

Despite the South Asian nation-state's die-hard Argentinian football fanbase, Bangladesh and Argentina are seldom brought up in the field of International Relations for having strong diplomatic ties with one another. However, the emergence of the viral expressions of support for the Argentinian football team by fans in Bangladesh and some reciprocity by Argentinian people and media outlets have been followed by marked interest voiced by Argentina to renew its diplomatic mission to the South Asian nation-state³.

Contrary to popular belief, establishment of Argentinian diplomatic mission in Dhaka did not simply arise out for the blue because of the latter nation's football-crazed fanbase; at most it boosted the renewed interest through the Argentine Foreign Minister, Santiago Cafiero's reiteration of the interest through via Twitter⁴. Furthermore, he tweeted about his meeting with Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Abul Kalam Abdul Momen at the 10th Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, posting a picture of the two shaking hands with each other. In a separate post, Mr. Cafiero also noted that Argentina had exported goods totaling USD 876 million in 2021, an all-time high⁵.

News of Argentina's plans for opening its embassy in Dhaka first emerged earlier in July 2022, with undersecretary for Foreign Policy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Trade and Worship of Argentina Claudio Rozenzwaig's announcement of said plans to Federation of

³ The Daily Star "Argentina plans to open embassy in Bangladesh" 12 December 2022. Available at: <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/diplomacy/news/argentina-plans-open-embassy-bangladesh-3194096>

⁴ ibid

⁵ Merco Press "Argentina to reopen embassy in Bangladesh" 11 December 2022. Available at: <https://en.mercopress.com/2022/12/11/argentina-to-reopen-embassy-in-bangladesh>

Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industries (FBCCI)⁶. It was also marked by the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding which would lay the platform for regular discussions between the governments of the two states⁷. Bangladesh also received symbolic support from Argentina during the 1971 Liberation War through famous Argentine poet Victoria Ocampo's movement to raise awareness about the unjust war⁸.

Fast-forward to 2022, football can be seen as a public diplomacy tool between Bangladesh and Argentina. While its own national football team has never qualified for the FIFA World Cup, it is as though Bangladeshi football fans have made the Argentinian football team their de facto national team. The support shown for South American football team was reciprocated with Argentinians watching Bangladesh's cricket series with India, supporting the red and green jersey-ed team⁹. According to the Honorary Consul of Bangladesh in Argentina, Leandro E. Gabardi¹⁰: "... the love and fanaticism that Bangladesh shares for [Argentina] have been witnessed in a very visible way. Nowadays, every Argentine knows who Bangladesh is ..."

Football has effectively taken the form of a soft-power tool in the case of Argentina and Bangladesh relations. Joseph Nye, one of the key proponents of the concept, defined soft power

⁶ The Business Standard "Argentina considering opening embassy in Bangladesh" 12 July 2022. Available at: <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/argentina-considering-opening-embassy-bangladesh-456930>

⁷ The Business Standard "Bangladesh, Argentina sign MoU on bilateral consultation" 12 July 2022. Available at: <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/bangladesh-argentina-sign-mou-bilateral-consultation-457126>

⁸ Prabir Barua Chowdhury "Ocampo stood by Bangalees in '71" The Daily Star. 17 December 2016. Available at: <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/ocampo-stood-bangalees-71-1331158>

⁹ Hoque 2022

¹⁰ Fazley Rabbi Moon "'Nowadays, every Argentine knows about Bangladesh.'" Dhaka Tribune. 13 December 2022. Available at: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/fifa-world-cup-2022/2022/12/13/nowadays-every-argentine-knows-about-bangladesh>

as the ability of a state to influence the behavior of other state(s) to get the outcomes preferable to it through cooperation. The ecstatic support of Bangladeshi football fanbase towards the Argentine football team prompted renewed boost of both diplomatic and public relations between the two states. Here, the Bangladeshi viewership plays a critical role as a soft-power mechanism, since it was the catalyst of the Argentine Foreign Minister's renewed expression of interest in establishing an embassy in Bangladesh. Social media proved to be an essential device for the spread of knowledge about the viewership and Bangladeshi football fan base for the Argentinian national football team. In fact, it was only after the video published by FIFA of Bangladeshi fans' support of Argentinian football team became viral that the support for the latter among the Bangladeshi people snowballed on the internet, with more images and videos of Bangladeshi people wearing Argentinian jerseys, hoisting flags, going to rallies, and watching Argentina's match late at night started circulating on the digital infosphere¹¹.

For Argentina, football as a soft-power tool in the case of its relations with Bangladesh emerged gradually. The origin of the Bangladeshi people's support for the Argentinian football team can be traced back to the 1986 FIFA World Cup and their fascination with Argentine football player Diego Maradona. This infatuation was perhaps further intensified with his winning goals against England in the 1986 FIFA World Cup, one praised for its skillful execution and the other for the controversy around it¹². The end result, however, was happy Bangladeshi fans, among many others in the world. Prior to this a smaller fanbase existed around Argentine football player Mario Kempes, which later expanded as support for the entire team with the very first FIFA World Cup

¹¹ Hoque 2022

¹² Diego Maradona's controversial goal "The Hand of God"

broadcast in the country. Nowadays, much of the new generation for the Argentine football team revolves around renowned athlete Lionel Messi.

A question that needs to be asked is what are the advantages that will follow the establishment of an Argentine embassy in Bangladesh. First of all, there is the issue of strengthening economic ties. A majority of Argentinian exports to Bangladesh are primary products. Establishing a diplomatic mission in Bangladesh will allow the South American state to keep a close eye on the economy and the demand for exports in the economy. In fact, historically, ambassadors and diplomatic missions have been placed in foreign states with the objective of them becoming local experts of the said foreign state to inform diplomatic policies in the origin state¹³.

Secondly, the establishment of an embassy in Bangladesh by Argentina would be an important political symbolism for marking strengthened ties between the two states. It would mark the representation of the Argentine Republic as a sovereign in the South Asian nation-state. Specifically, it would act as a clear sign to the host government of a commitment to deepening bilateral relations.

The establishment of an Argentine diplomatic mission can also help promote cultural exchanges between the two states. It would provide both states with the opportunity to expand their respective tourism sector and promote tourism in one another's states. It can act as an avenue of linguistic

¹³ Lora Viola "The Reinvention of Diplomacy" 2008.

exchange, and given the prominent standing of Spanish as a language in the international arena, the Bangladeshi people could greatly benefit from such an initiative.

Additionally, since the Argentinian football team has already made its footprint internationally as one of the most skilled football teams, Bangladesh can also try to leverage its strengthened ties by negotiating better training and management of its own national football team. In exchange, Bangladesh can also introduce Argentinians to the international cricket arena, welcoming them to participate in the sport on a global level. Afterall, much of Bangladesh and Argentina's current love story is based on unity through sports, and cooperation in the sports sector can only be viewed as a full circle to the love story.

The multi-faceted popularity of football as a sport has allowed it to become both a platform for and tool of international politics. The Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup is evidence of that. Just as it has stood out as a platform for many states and athletes to be vocal about their political opinions, for Bangladesh and Argentina it came guised as a platform of the beginning of new strengthened ties. Much of this progress can be attributed to the silent soft power game played by the two states either knowingly or unknowingly. In conclusion, a formal diplomatic relation can greatly advantage both Bangladesh and Argentina, and would probably exemplify one of the most prominent examples of unity through sports.