Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Harvey Morris

Fallout from England's Premier League turmoil goes beyond football

One of the UK's most successful enterprises, the English football Premier League, is in turmoil after its current first-ranked team was found guilty of breaching financial rules to buy its way to the top.

The drama enveloping Manchester City has spread from the club's boardroom and terraces to generate wider concerns about potential fallout that goes beyond sport.

It raises questions about the benefits and perils of foreign investment in iconic national institutions and the economic role of England's now money-focused 'beautiful game'.

The news of the guilty verdict emerged last Friday and dominated the headlines ahead of the weekend annual conference of the ruling Labour Party, the first under the leadership of Prime Minister Andy Burnham.

The gravity of the affair was underlined by the fact that even he found time to address it, urging people not to jump to conclusions about the penalties Man City might face before they studied the findings.

An independent commission found the club had committed all but one of 115 alleged breaches of the Premier League's financial rules between 2009 and 2018 in a case that has been rumbling on for years.

The Premier League had maintained that the club broke fair play rules by inflating its income from sponsorship and making payments to staff that did not figure in the accounts.

The club continues to deny wrongdoing and an appeal could extend the uncertainty for months or years.

If the verdict is confirmed, the punishment could extend to City losing previous titles and even facing relegation from the top tier of English football.

A potential diplomatic challenge

Beyond the impact on the game, the issue presents a potential diplomatic challenge for the government.

Manchester City has been owned since 2008 by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, a member of the Abu Dhabi royal family and vice-president of the United Arab Emirates, who acquired it from former Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

The inquiry covered a years-long period coinciding with Sheikh Mansour's ownership and the rise of the club's fortunes that saw it take a raft of top-level titles.

City won eight trophies in the period covered by the case, including three Premier League titles and one FA Cup, the annual England knockout contest.

It was also a time in which the club succeeded in attracting top players and managers, including Spain's Pep Guardiola, who stepped down this year after a decade as manager.

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In the process, City is estimated to have spent more than £3 billion on acquiring players.

In his previous role as Manchester mayor, Burnham had spoken of the club's owners as "huge partners" in improving life in the northern city.

An eventual judgment that might see Man City stripped of titles or even kicked out of the league could test UK-UAE relations at a critical time for bilateral cooperation in the Gulf region.

Involvement in football and other sports financing in the UK and elsewhere is seen as enhancing the Gulf state's soft power status, although human rights activists regard it as "sportwashing" that glosses over its internal policies.

More than just a game

On the UK domestic front, football is also more than just a game when it comes to the national economy.

A report from global consultancy EY-Parthenon in July projected that the Premier League would generate a record £33 billion in gross value added (GVA) for the UK economy between 2025-2028, in addition to £14.8 billion in tax revenues, and support more than 100,000 jobs.

The report noted that 46 per cent of the world's top-rated 100 players competed for Premier League clubs, more than any other individual football league.

So where does the drama leave football, one of the UK's most enduring and venerable exports and, latterly, a significant money-spinner?

Sports commentator Martin Samuel wrote in The Times that the Manchester City verdict was a victory for those who sought to punish cheats but that it left the world's top football league reduced to rubble.

It cast a shadow on previous triumphs. "If the Premier League begins redistributing trophies, its record books will look like a bad exam paper," he wrote.

The bedrock of the game

And what of the fans, the bedrock of the game?

The government established an independent football regulator a year ago to protect and promote the financial soundness of all tiers of professional football clubs for the benefit of fans.

Those stalwarts who trek weekly to their home terraces or travel afar to support their teams in away games can sometimes feel left out in the world of modern football.

Something of the local camaraderie may have dissolved in the money-oriented gentrification of the sport

Ticket prices have rocketed in recent decades and regular season ticket holders have started to complain that clubs are squeezing them in favour of higher-paying, one-off football "tourists".

They are unlikely to be assuaged by Burnham's hints of lifting an alcohol ban that was introduced in 1985 to try to restore calm on the frequently combative terraces.

In the old days, professional football was very much an activity for and of the working class. Until 1961, weekly pay for players was pegged at £20, around £600 in today's money.

The game generated and sustained quasi-tribal local loyalties that could descend into the widespread hooliganism of the 1970s and 80s.

It's calmer these days, although riot police were recently deployed in advance of a rare match between notorious London rivals Millwall and West Ham. But something of the local camaraderie may have dissolved in the money-oriented gentrification of the sport.

Foreign and domestic investment have been crucial to the changes. Stadiums are sprucer and more welcoming, and the standard of the game has improved with the importation of some of the world's top players.

But perhaps some of the societal essence of the old game has been lost in the process.