**[Raining athletes](https://www.dawn.com/news/1849361/raining-athletes)**

[F.S. Aijazuddin](https://www.dawn.com/authors/1314/f-s-aijazuddin) Published August 1, 2024

THE opening ceremony of the 2024 Olympics in Paris was like baking a soufflé in the rain. Even French expertise could not make it rise.

The French, defying convention, decided not to hold the inaugural ceremony in a stadium. They used the Seine, its ornate bridges and the iconic Eiffel Tower instead. The French should have consulted the British. In 2012, they ignored the Thames. Rain has ruined many a royal regatta.

A century has passed since Parisians last hosted the Olympics. In 1924, 3,089 athletes took part, of them 2,954 men and 135 women. In 2024, there are 11,040 competitors, half of whom are female.

Athletes compete as countries and also as members of National Olympic Committees. This year, there are 206 such NOCs — an insidious ruse by which the IOC will decide which country to admit and which to punish.

There is only so much you can do with a river of flowing water.

The Olympics imitate the power politics of the UN. In 1964, South Africa was exclu­ded for its apartheid against blacks. In 1972, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) was excluded for its racist policies. In 2000, Afghanistan was excluded from Sydney for its misogynist policies.

In both 2016 and 2020, the IOC banned Russian athletes from competing under their national flag because of ‘doping violations’. In 2024, Russia and Belarus have been banned over the war in Ukraine. How­ever, their athletes can still compete as ‘ind­i­vidual neutral athletes’, under a neutral flag.

Meanwhile, Nato and its allied countries suffer no such strictures. Ukraine — their battleground — has sent 140 competitors. Israel mired in Gaza is fielding 88 competitors, the State of Palestine eight. Even the stateless have been admitted. The IOC has allowed 37 athletes to compete as a Refugee Olympic Team.

It would be a simpleton who still believes that the Olympic motto (‘Faster, Higher, Stronger — Together’) carries any meaning. The Olympics remain a white man’s Coliseum, albeit with an increasing number of black gladiators.

The majority of the Summer Olympics have been held in white countries — in Western Europe, the US, Canada, and Australia. Four Summer Games have been hosted in yellow countries (all in East Asia), three have been hosted in Eastern Europe, and two in Latin America. Black Africa has yet to host any Olympics.

The first black Olympian George Poage won two bronze medals in the St Louis Olympics, 120 years ago. In Berlin 1936, Jesse Owens won four gold medals. Hitler chose not to meet Owens. In 1960, an Ethiopian Abebe Bikila (the son of a shepherd) startled the world by winning the marathon (running barefoot). He repeated his success in Tokyo 1964.

Today, colour is no longer a badge of nationality, nor gender a divisor of sex. (Some liberal Parisians were shocked at the tableau of drag queens performing a parody of Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper.)

One needed the stamina of an Olympian to watch the opening ceremony (it spanned four hours) until its shimmering finale at the Eiffel Tower, where the Canadian chanteuse Celine Dion sang Edith Piaf’s signature L’Hymne à l’Amour.

In between, about 10,500 rain-sodden athletes with their supporting team officials waved national flags in a nautical armada that cruised slowly down the Seine. From its banks, viewers were entertained by Lady Gaga performing Mon Truc en Plumes in a flurry of pink ostrich feathers, reminiscent of the legendary chanteuse Mistinguett.

Other distractions were a frenetic group of Can Can dancers ending with splits, and a team of spirited dancers splashing mindlessly (like the cast of Friends) in a fountain.

Frankly, some of the images were horrific — multiple ones of a de­­ca­pitated Queen Marie Antoinette framed in the windows of a public building, or famous po-rtraits half-submerged in the Seine. The surrealist artist Salvador Dali would have loved these.

To be fair, there is only so much you can do with a river of flowing water, just as a Son et Lumière using the flat-faced pyramids at Giza offers limited options.

Pakistan’s lean participation in the Olympics is a triumph of private endeavour over public neglect. In 1960, 1968, and 1984, we won the gold in hockey. For the past three Olympics, we failed even to qualify. As in our politics, we no longer play team sports.

This year we have sent seven self-motivated athletes to Paris. The talented javelin thrower Arshad Nadeem (27); the sprinter Faiqa Riaz (24); sharpshooters G.M. Bashir (37), Gulfam Joseph (24), and Kishmala Ta­­lat (22); and two minnow swimmers Jeha­nara Nabi (20) and Ahmed Durrani (18). They are old enough to compete, and young enough to succeed in future Olympics.

They owe nothing to the state. Over 245 million Pakistanis owe everything to them — for loving our country, despite what it is.

*The writer is an author.*

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