[**Sport as politics**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1654700/sport-as-politics)

[Aasim Sajjad Akhtar](https://www.dawn.com/authors/3/aasim-sajjad-akhtar)Published October 29, 2021 - Updated a day ago

The writer teaches at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

IT is said that sports and politics do not mix, or, rather, should not mix. Over the past week, under the backdrop of the T20 Cricket World Cup, it has become clear that sports and politics, are, in fact, indivisible.

The India vs Pakistan match started it all off. In recent years, Pakistan has suffered cricketing isolation while India has risen to the financial apex of the cricketing hierarchy. It was thus that Pakistanis [revelled in victory](https://www.dawn.com/news/1653784/a-beautiful-day-for-pakistan-cricket-fans-ecstatic-as-green-shirts-achieve-historic-win-vs-india), but the story that stood out was the sportsmanship shown by India’s captain Virat Kohli through his effusive congratulations to Pakistan’s game-winning batting pair.

**Read:** [*'This is cricket': Sportsmanship wins hearts after the Pakistan-India T20 match*](https://images.dawn.com/news/1188660/this-is-cricket-sportsmanship-wins-hearts-after-the-pakistan-india-t20-match)

Within a few hours, the feel-good factor on both sides of the border had been replaced by hate and propaganda. Indian Muslim bowler Mohammad Shami was [subjected](https://www.dawn.com/news/1653970) to horrific online abuse by Hindu right-wing trolls, some even calling for him to ‘return to Pakistan’, while two Pakistani ministers poured fuel on the fire. Sheikh Rashid explicitly declared Pakistan’s win a “victory of Islam”, celebrated by Muslims in India too — doing the latter no favour. Cricketing icon Waqar Younis chimed in by mocking ‘Hindus’ who were on the field while a Pakistani player offered prayers.

Afghanistan’s first match in the tournament also turned out to be a highly political affair. The Afghan team repeatedly called attention to their pride at representing the tricolour Afghan flag, a symbol that has been contested greatly since the Ghani regime was deposed in August. Whether they were signalling to a tyrannical Taliban regime is immaterial; what the world saw was a group of players wearing the emotions of a war-ravaged country on their sleeves. A majority of Afghanistan’s 40 million people now face mass starvation.

Even rivalry on the field reflects political tensions.

When Pakistan play Afghanistan later today, it can be expected that political tensions will be high. Pakistanis who have been brought up supporting hare-brained schemes like strategic depth should understand the extent of the resentment felt by many Afghans for the establishment here. This sentiment is shared by many Pakistani progressives who have always stood against the weaponisation of religion by their state.

Which brings me to the match between New Zealand and Pakistan, during which the theme of ‘security’ animated many Pakistani digs at the New Zealanders. The banter was relatively harmless, a reference to the [last-minute refusal](https://www.dawn.com/news/1646874) of the New Zealand team to play cricket in Pakistan under the guise of a security threat. But, as the TLP runs riot on GT Road and the TTP spreads its tentacles in the Pakhtun periphery, some introspection about our ‘national security’ shenanigans would be wise.

Beyond Pakistan, South African cricketer Quinton de Kock’s [refusal](https://www.dawn.com/news/1654170) to ‘take the knee’ during his country’s match against the West Indies was rightly met with widespread condemnation; South Africa remains one of the most racially divided countries in the world, the memory of apartheid still fresh. Meanwhile, the Caribbean was one of the hubs of progressive anti-colonial politics during the 20th century.

The West Indies cricket team earned global recognition for its unabashed aggression against the racism of white English, Australian and South African cricketers in the 1970s. Viv Richards & co were the inheritors of the anti-imperialist humanism of C.L.R. James and Frantz Fanon.

The African American athlete Colin Kaepernick thrust politics back to the centre stage of sporting contests when he ‘took the knee’ during the US national anthem in 2016. Through his symbolic action, he drew attention to unending police violence and other forms of racism against black civilians. Then US president Donald Trump reacted in kind, pandering to his own racist, misogynistic gallery. Black Lives Matter followed, taking all white-majority countries — and sporting industries — by storm.

That even the act of ‘taking the knee’ is controversial confirms the unfinished struggle against racism and colonialism for coloured peoples everywhere. That cricketers like Shami become ‘bad Muslims’ in India after being defeated by Pakistan shows the extent to which right-wing Hindu majoritarianism has penetrated society. And if matches with India, Afghanistan and even New Zealand serve a narrow, strategic purpose, we can never expect to move beyond the weaponisation of religion.

Capitalism commodifies sport with each passing day. Rags-to-riches stories about individuals who make it as global superstars betray the grotesque amounts of money that are made through all of us consumers by unaccountable corporations and states alongside. We can enjoy healthy sporting competition without being at the mercy of profiteers and hatemongers. It is our challenge to give every young person in this world — including girls — the chance to enjoy sports, and, in­­de­ed all other forms of recreation. Capitalism and hateful nationalism will never allow such a dream to become reality.

*The writer teaches at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.*

*Published in Dawn, October 29th, 2021*