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Spanish State

Rubiales' kiss creates political storm

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Dave Kellaway provides an in-depth analysis of the controversy surrounding Spanish Football Federation President Luis Rubiales and his inappropriate behaviour towards women's national team player Jenni Hermoso, examining the machismo culture underlying Rubiales' actions and the strong backlash against him.

Those fans who had not switched off after the defeat against Spain in the Women's World Cup final would have observed the antics of Luis Rubiales, the Chair of the Spanish Football Federation, during the celebrations with the Spanish team. He had already clutched his crotch earlier in a sign of celebration. On the pitch, he lifted one of the players on his back like a firefighter, hugged and kissed others on the cheek, and in the official presentation, he gave Jenni Hermoso a kiss on the lips.

In the outcry that followed and the statement from Hermoso that she did not feel at all comfortable about it, he made a weasel-like half apology. Condemnation of his actions followed from many of Hermoso's teammates, major league clubs, and the Spanish government. The Prime Minister, Pedro Sanchez, intervened and effectively called for Rubiales to go.

The Spanish state, along with Portugal and Morocco, is well advanced in its bid to stage the 2030 World Cup, which would generate a huge tourist income. Expressions of machismo like this are not a good look for this process.

So amid a number of leaks, it was assumed that Rubiales was going to announce he was going to step down in a speech delivered today to federation members. Instead, we had the bombshell of him doubling down and saying he was not going to resign; he repeated this statement about five times to make sure everyone got the message. He blamed false feminists who were hunting him down unfairly. He was the victim, and Hermoso was a willing participant. He seemed to have torn up his earlier half-apology.

It is difficult to disentangle his stance from the gearing up of culture wars in the recent national elections by the right wing Peoples Party and the neo-fascist Vox current. The latter, in particular, has denounced feminists and attacked gay and trans activists. Measures against progressives have been taken by the regional governments that these parties now govern in coalition.

Another factor in Rubiales attitude is his close relationship with Jorge Vilda, the women's team coach. A year or so ago, there was a revolt by 15 of the squad against his coaching and management. For example, he would check their hotel rooms and act in a very authoritarian way in training. Although some key players were reintegrated for the tournament, the vast majority remained outcasts. It was noticeable that during goal celebrations, the players and Vilda were apart, and there was a marked coolness shown between him and the squad.

In his non-resignation speech today, Rubiales specifically mentioned Vilda as if to place his so-called persecution alongside the problems Vilda had. The latter was among those who applauded the loudest at the end of the speech. Indeed, Rubiales is apparently negotiating a big new salary contract for him.

Ana Requena Aguilar has written an excellent article (A man in love with his balls) in *El Diario*, a progressive national daily in the Spanish state, where she deconstructs the speech point by point, demonstrating how it is a classic machista reaction:

Step one: deny the facts or muddy the waters. It was spontaneous, mutual, euphoric, and consensual. He adds a gloss that he had not mentioned before: that the player had lifted him up by the hips and initiated close bodily contact. She apparently said vale (okay) when he asked if he could give her a little kiss. Rubiales denied any sexual intent. What he leaves out is the power relationship. He said he was not dominating. But he forgets that he is the leader of the football federation that employs her and picks her for the team. He fails to understand his position of power.

Step two: in the machista playbook, you then use the women who are around you to exonerate you. It is a bit like saying some of my best friends are black, a ploy used in relation to excusing racism. As though having a mother, daughters, or wife stops you from being sexist. Rubiales actually brought his three daughters to the meeting to use them as props in his justification. One of them started crying, and he directly addressed her, telling her not to cry and to be proud of him. He told them that there was a lesson on equality being given today and that the truth did not depend on whether something was being said by a man or a woman. Somehow he fails to see that condemnation of his actions has been received across the board by men and women.

Step three: construct a distinction between feminism acceptable to people like him and extreme feminism, which he defined as 'false'. In this day and age, it is difficult for people like him to completely reject what is increasingly mainstream, so he has to create what is actually a false counterposition.

Step four: invoke the inquisition against yourself. These false feminists are trying to destroy you as a person. He talked about a 'social assassination', likening the feminist movement to a lynching court out to kill him. So rather than acknowledging that there was a victim as a consequence of his (and Vilda's) actions, he becomes the victim. It makes you think of another powerful sexist man, Donald Trump, who was flaunting his mug shot on social media as Rubiales was delivering his speech.

Countries vary in how quickly and thoroughly they have become more progressive in terms of sexism or racism. You can see things in Italy, for example, the continuation of beauty contests, that rarely or never happen in Britain. Similarly, with racism in football, Britain is overall further down the road than the Spanish state. Rubiales is obviously well behind the curve in Spain, particularly given the recent legal progress enacted by the left-of-centre government in Spain.

If you watch to the end of the video, you can see the reaction of the room to the speech. Not everybody applauded or stood, but the majority did, and there were few women there in any case. What it shows is how sexism also depends on a sort of fraternity between men—a locker room mentality. The fact that there were mostly men meant this reaction was much more inevitable. Like bullying, acquiescence to sexism is governed by this sort of learned group dynamics. It is a behaviour that has to be systematically challenged and educated against.

Where do Rubiales (and Vilda) go from here? The case has already been referred to disciplinary procedures inside the federation, within FIFA (the International Football Federation), and the higher tribunal for sport. The government is being proactive and was involved in the latter referral. A male player has already said he will refuse to play for the national team if Rubiales stays. Further boycotts could develop. Her trade union is also taking the matter up.

The affair is at the top of the political agenda in the Spanish state at the moment, and it is difficult to see how he can survive the crisis.

Stop Press

In a dramatic development, 81 players have now confirmed they will refuse to play for Spain's women's national team until Rubiales is removed from his post. Meanwhile, the Spanish Football Federation has said it will sue

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Hermoso and other players for defamation over their allegations against Rubiales.

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