

## F1 should not race in Saudi Arabia – it should speak out about human rights

Saudi Arabia has announced plans to stage a Formula One race at a brand-new, purpose-built circuit [from 2023](#). As an F1 fan, I should be excited at the prospect of a potential new race in a country the championship has never visited before - but I'm not.

It's for the same reason I can't get behind other races in the likes of Bahrain, China and Russia. That reason is these countries' poor human rights records.

You might not think of Saudi Arabia as a major player in the world of motorsport, but it already hosts a round of the Formula E championship for electric single-seater racing cars and was the location for this year's Dakar Rally. Adding F1 to this mix may therefore seem like a natural progression.

Yet this is a country which practises the death penalty and has [executed people arrested as teenagers](#). Not only that, the horrific murder of journalist [Jamal Khashoggi](#), a critic of Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman, demonstrates what I believe to be a wanton disregard for freedom of expression, while the cover-up attempt that followed showed a disgraceful lack of remorse. Of course, women in Saudi Arabia also face [severe discrimination](#) and despite a slight relaxing of restrictions, such as lifting the ban on driving, activists that campaigned for these changes remain [imprisoned](#).

A cynic might say that in sport, money talks, and the prospect of approximately [US\\$50 million](#) a year in hosting fees was too good for F1 to turn down. I'm not naïve to this reality, but what is disappointing is that little seems to have changed in this regard since F1's new owners, Liberty Media, assumed control.

In the days of Bernie Ecclestone, it wasn't that surprising to see him sat next to Russian president Vladimir Putin at the Grand Prix in Sochi – not exactly great PR. In contrast, Liberty have taken steps to improve the sport's image, be it replacing 'grid girls' with '[grid kids](#)' or stating their ambition to make F1 [carbon neutral](#) by 2030. However, when it comes to the location of races, it seems growing F1's audience and bringing in more revenue take priority over human rights concerns.

F1 has been here before. The championship last raced in South Africa in 1985 during the apartheid era, while protests in Bahrain ultimately led to the [cancellation](#) of the 2011 race. The grand prix took place the following year despite [further protests](#) in the country calling for it to be axed.

In its human rights [statement](#), F1 claims it is "committed to respecting internationally recognised human rights in its operations globally" and that it seeks to "understand and monitor... the potential human rights impacts of our activities." If this statement means anything, then surely when deciding where to stage F1 races, the human rights records of host countries should be a prime consideration.

Few, if any, countries have spotless human rights records, and none should be held to unrealistically high standards. But there comes a point when a line has to be drawn:

racing in a state that has received international [condemnation](#) for its human rights abuses is unacceptable.

F1 would not be the first sport to host a major event in Saudi Arabia - accusations of '[sportswashing](#)' seem to have done little to reduce its popularity as a go-to location. The December 2019 heavyweight boxing match between Anthony Joshua and Andy Ruiz Jr, the Saudi International golf tournament that has formed part of the European Tour since it was first held in January and February 2019, as well as Spanish and Italian football cup competitions have all taken place in the country.

While questions have rightly been asked of organisers in the build-up to events, the danger, according to academics [César Jiménez-Martínez and Michael Skey](#), is that this scrutiny and criticism simply melts away once the first punch is thrown, shot hit, or ball kicked. Likewise, once the starting lights go out at a future Saudi Arabian Grand Prix, human rights are unlikely to be the major talking point.

If a race in Saudi Arabia is added to the F1 calendar, then it will be up to the teams and drivers to make their feelings known on the matter. There is precedent for doing so among fellow athletes: golfer Rory McIlroy chose not to compete at the this year's Saudi International, citing "[morality](#)" as one of the reasons for his decision.

While it's perhaps unreasonable to expect F1 drivers to boycott a race, they could and should use their profile to ensure human rights concerns are not disregarded. Given the likely backlash they would face for speaking out, presenting a united front via the Grand Prix Drivers' Association (GPDA) would be a sensible move. Unfortunately, the chairman of the GPDA, former F1 racer Alexander Wurz, is the man responsible for designing the [Qiddiyah track](#) where a Saudi Arabian Grand Prix would be held. A number of current and former F1 drivers were also present at the track's reveal.

Wurz and others may hope that F1 can be a positive force for change in Saudi Arabia. After all, the growth of sporting events and the development of the Qiddiyah track are part of the regime's '[Vision 2030](#)' programme designed to improve its citizens' quality of life and transform the country's economy.

But the only way F1 can have a real and lasting impact which improves the lives of people living in Saudi Arabia is if it challenges those practices that undermine their human rights. By racing in the country, this sends a signal that such behaviour will continue to be tolerated. If Saudi Arabia wishes to open up, then it should expect to face questions about its human rights record as well as calls for change. F1, and sport more widely, has a role to play in ensuring that this is the case.