

Adekeye Adebajo's contribution to this issue of ARB induces us to reflect further on the big event in Africa this year: the 2010 World Cup. In an earlier article (*Mail and Guardian*, 12-18 March 2010) 'In the footsteps of Henry Kissinger's prognosis of the 1986 World Cup', Adebajo had weighed the chances of an African team winning the much-coveted trophy by relating each of the six African teams to their national characteristics. His prediction, which sadly has proven accurate, was that 'it will take a while longer before Africa's football and national characteristic align sufficiently to claim the ultimate prize'. As it turned out, even a semi-final place eluded Africa.

This despite the fact that the event had fortuitously coincided with the Golden Jubilee of the great year of Africa, 1960. Exactly fifty years ago, the wind of independence swept across the continent, along the trail first blazed by Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana in 1957. Again in September 1960, a bare-footed Ethiopian athlete by the name of Abebe Bikila won the Marathon at the Rome Olympics, smashing the world record and earning black Africa's first Olympic gold medal. Now, once again, Africa has become the focus of global attention.

There is no doubt that the stature and charisma of Nelson Mandela contributed a lot to the selection of South Africa to host this important event. At the same time, however, the selection marked the culmination of decades of struggle by leaders of African football for equity. Particular mention should be made in this respect of Yidnekachew Tesema, president of the Confederation of African Football (CAF) from 1972 to 1987. In his capacity as head of the African football governing body and member of the Executive Committee of FIFA, he waged an unrelenting struggle on two fronts: the exclusion of apartheid South Africa from international competitions and the equitable representation of Africa in the World Cup finals. Thanks to his and his colleagues' efforts, the place for African teams in the finals grew progressively from half (with a playoff between the African and Asian champions to secure the one spot) to one, two and more recently five.

Even after the honour of hosting the event was awarded to South Africa some six years back, there were lingering doubts and reservations about its capacity to stage such a big event. The 'Cabinda incident', when the Togo national team that was taking part in the African Cup of Nations tournament in Angola in January 2010 was ambushed, had fueled these reservations. But all these doubts were blown away as South Africa made the whole continent proud by staging it in such a spectacular fashion.

The only two jarring notes on the impeccable organization came at the very end, and they had nothing to do with the South Africans themselves. At the final award ceremony, rather than letting South African president Jacob Zuma award the trophy to the winning

Spanish team from his designated place with the decorum that the occasion demanded, Sepp Blatter dragged the guest of honour in rather undignified fashion to where the ecstatic champions were preparing to celebrate; in the end, he himself effectively gave the trophy to the Spanish captain, allowing the South African president only the barest of touches. The other jarring note occurred thousands of miles away in the Ugandan capital when two simultaneous explosions claimed the lives of over 70 spectators of the final match. Thus, by a curious twist of fate, just as the Somali rapper K'Naan had come to symbolize, alongside the Colombian star Shakira with her 'Waka Waka' ('This Time for Africa'), the festive spirit of the event with his uplifting song, so did the fanatical Somali group Al Shabab manage to spoil the show at the very last minute.

Even the distinctive vuzuzelas, so irksome at the beginning to many of the pros, who claimed the din made it impossible for them to communicate on the pitch, eventually came to be adopted by fans of all colours and hues. Indeed, their popularity went beyond the World Cup venues, as demonstrators elsewhere picked them up as effective media to blast their slogans. Hyundai capitalized on its popularity to manufacture a giant edition of the trumpet to advertise its wares. It is a mark of the commercialism that attends sporting events that a great proportion of these vuzuzelas were actually plastic versions of the traditional African instrument manufactured in bulk in China.

The success of the organization began with the architectural feat that the stadiums symbolized, particularly the distinctively African calabash-shaped one at Soccer City. That this iconic emblem of World Cup 2010 should be based in Soweto, the symbol of African resistance to apartheid and the venue where Mandela made his first speech after his release from over two decades of detention, had great symbolic significance. The faultless pitches also put to shame the great citadel of English football, Wembley Stadium.

It was part of the ritual that the host nation should play the opening match. But few people expected that it would open the score tally with such a spectacular shot by Sipihwe Tshabalala. That feat could not be sustained, however, and what many people dreaded came to pass: Bafana Bafana made their exit at the first round. But not before inflicting a humiliating defeat on the French, champions of 1998 and runner-up in the last World Cup! But, the fear of teams playing in empty stadiums once the host nation was kicked out proved groundless, as the South Africans continued to crowd the

stadiums and cheer on their preferred teams with their non-stop vuzuzelas. Even after the exit of the host team, attendance at Soccer City stadium remained at almost full capacity, which is a rarity.

The 2010 World Cup is memorable for many things. The capricious and controversial brand ball, the Jabulani ('rejoice' in Zulu!), turned out to be many a goalie's nightmare. Strikers too had a hard time controlling long passes, as the ball slid out at uncontrollable speed. This was also a World Cup where the Drogbas, the Messis, the Rooneys and the Ronaldos could not replicate their dazzling performances or their prodigious goal-scoring feats of the Premier League or La Liga. Some pundits attributed this to their being selfish. Diego Maradona, the hapless Argentinian coach who saw his brilliant side trashed by Germany in the quarterfinals, forwarded a more convincing explanation: that they were not selfish enough but were rather shackled by team discipline, so that they ended up being led by their team mates rather than leading them, as he himself did in 1986. Like the equally lackluster Dunga of Brazil, who had sacrificed the celebrated Brazilian artistry for an allegedly more effective if dour strategy, Maradona was doubly mortified as the glory of lifting the prized trophy as both player and coach eluded him.

It was also a tournament where the finalists of the last World Cup, France and Italy, were sent home rather ignominiously at the end of the first round. As the tournament progressed, the South Americans, who had dominated the first two rounds, were reduced to one national team by the semi-final stage. What looked like developing into an all-South American final ended up as an all-European one. Brazil, the favorite to lift the trophy, was denied the rare honour of winning the tournament in every continent where it was staged.

Above all, the 2010 World Cup remains embedded in our memory because of the performance of the Black Stars of Ghana. As the other star-studded African teams crushed out at the first round, the Black Stars went on bravely to knock out the US in the second round. Thereafter, they became the continent's team, not just the national team of Ghana. South Africans, in a skillful adaptation of their own national team's name, christened the Black Stars 'Baghana Baghana'. They were poised to make history by proceeding to the semi-finals were it not for the cruel intervention of the hands – not feet – of a Uruguayan striker! It was not the first time in their troubled history that Africans were cheated of honour and

glory in such devious fashion. As it turned out, Uruguay produced the best – Diego Forlan, who combined footballing skill with impeccable character and deservedly won the Golden Ball – and the most dubious, the striker-turned-goalie Luis Suarez.

As Ghana was given the decisive penalty at the very end of extra time, the hearts and minds of millions of Africans were riveted on that ball and the striker, Asamoah Gyan. Poor Gyan! What a responsibility he had to shoulder on behalf of his continent, as the Black Stars found themselves on the threshold of history to become the first African team to make it to the semi-finals. That it was indeed a heavy responsibility was proven when the otherwise deadly striker hit the crossbar instead of the net, thereby joining a legion of superstars who missed crucial penalties – Baggio, Beckham, Shevchenko and Zhiko. With that miss, the hearts of millions of Africans also sank.

Many an African spectator felt that FIFA, if it wishes to lend any credence to its much-trumpeted 'fair play' motto, should make a ruling that such flagrant violations of the rule of the game be punished by allowing the goal rather than showing the culprit a meaningless red card and awarding the cheated side a penalty that could be missed. But it would be a miracle if the Neanderthal mindset of FIFA officialdom ever entertains such an option. Their stubborn refusal to allow any technological aids has resulted in the unprecedented sacking of four accredited referees before the end of the tournament.

The most dramatic flop was the second goal that England scored against Germany, which neither the referee nor his assistant could see, although it became evident on replay that the ball had gone some two feet over the line. Thus, by a bizarre twist of history, the Germans had their revenge on their English rivals, who had won the 1966 World Cup after they were awarded the first of their two winning goals by the referee, although the ball had actually hit the cross bar and bounced on the playing field. It is a fitting tribute to FIFA that, four and a half decades later, one still has to continue to rely on human frailty.

The Black Stars' record is all the more remarkable when one contrasts it with the dismal performance of the star-studded Indomitable Lions (Cameroon), who proved anything but indomitable, the [White?] Elephants (Côte d'Ivoire), the Super Eagles (Nigeria), who, far from flying, remained rooted to the ground, or the Desert Foxes (Algeria), whose goal-hunting proved sterile. Alas! Didier Drogba's dream of being the first African to lift the trophy to the African sky died at its fetal stage. The only plausible excuse the Elephants could adduce was that they were assigned to the so-called Group of Death, having had to beat Brazil and Portugal were they to qualify for the second round. Even more bizarre was the reaction of the Nigerian ruler, Goodluck Jonathan. He was so cross with the national team

that he banned it from playing international football for two years. Only to rescind that rather hasty and ill-considered decision in the face of FIFA's threat of dire consequences – and just one hour before the expiry of the deadline!

Such impulsive reactions by governments is surely not going to remedy the poor performance of African national teams. Rather, one has to learn from the success stories and try to replicate them. In this respect, the Black Stars of Ghana and the Pharaohs of Egypt are good examples. What the two national teams represent,

respectively, are youth and home-grown talent. The Ghanaian team that so resonated with the heartbeat of Africa was built around the Black Satellites, the young team that won the FIFA under-20 World Cup in 2009, beating in the final none other than Brazil. Indeed, the Black Satellites were runner-up in 1993 and 2001. There is no better illustration of the dividends that investing in youth pays than the composition of the Spanish champions. The core of that team (in fact seven out of the starting eleven) were from one team, Barcelona, and a number of these had been nurtured by the Barcelona youth academy.

The Pharaohs were not at the 2010 World Cup because they were beaten by the Algerians in the qualifiers. But many people argued that they would have performed much better than many of the other African teams had they made it to the finals. This is because they have demonstrated their worth in the African Cup of Nations, winning it for an unprecedented three times in succession. Many experts argue that the secret of their success lies in the cohesiveness of the team, largely because most of the players play in the national league; thus, not only do they know each other well but they have also developed a greater sense of national purpose.

Strange as this World Cup was, we are left with some pleasant and not so pleasant memories. Now that the great excitement is over, Africa has to take stock of its situation. South Africa has to try and translate the well-deserved accolade it has earned worldwide into social peace and equitable development. The other African countries have to try and answer the disturbing question of how is it that, fifty years after independence, Africa cannot go beyond the quarter-final stage of the World Cup. What is certain is that neither desperate last-minute import of foreign coaches nor impulsive retaliatory bans by governments are going to provide the solution.

