

Pressure Mounts on Spanish Soccer Chief Over Nonconsensual Kiss at World Cup

Luis Rubiales has defied calls to resign, now echoed by his own federation. Soccer's world governing body has suspended him, and prosecutors have opened an investigation.

By Rachel Chaundler and Aaron Boxerman

Reporting from Zaragoza, Spain, and London

Aug. 29, 2023

The pressure is growing on Luis Rubiales, president of Spain's national soccer federation, to quit, nine days after he forcibly kissed a member of the country's victorious women's World Cup team, igniting a national controversy over sexism in soccer and prompting calls for his resignation from government ministers.

Spanish prosecutors opened a preliminary investigation on Monday into whether the kiss on Jennifer Hermoso, a star forward, had been an act of sexual aggression — a crime punishable by years in prison. In an emergency meeting that stretched into Monday night, the federation unanimously called on him to step down immediately. And in Madrid, hundreds of people took to the streets, waving red cards and demanding Mr. Rubiales's resignation. FIFA, the soccer world's governing body, has already provisionally suspended him.

But the embattled soccer chief has given no sign he would change course since he forcefully defended himself in a speech on Friday, telling his federation five times in a row, "I will not resign."

Mr. Rubiales later traveled to his hometown, Motril, in southern Spain. There, his mother has been on a hunger strike in a church since Monday, protesting what she told reporters was an "inhumane and bloody hunt" against her son, according to the Spanish wire service EFE. On Tuesday, wearing the same dress as the day before and visibly tired, she said in a news conference inside the church, "I just want Jenni to tell the truth."

Responding to a call from Mr. Rubiales's family, about 200 people congregated outside the church in a show of support on Monday, Spanish news outlets reported, citing a police estimate.

Mr. Rubiales has insisted that the kiss was "spontaneous, mutual, euphoric and consensual." But Ms. Hermoso described it as "an impulse-driven, sexist, out-of-place act without any consent on my part."

The protest and hunger strike were for a man who at first denounced his critics as losers, then offered what some called a weak apology, and then hunkered down as the controversy swirled in Spain, where some soccer players and feminist activists have said the kissing episode encapsulated the male entitlement and entrenched sexism that have long plagued soccer.

Mr. Rubiales, 46, who was born in the Canary Islands and raised in Motril, began playing for his local soccer club at age 14, according to a biography on the soccer federation's website. He never became a household name playing for clubs in Spain and Scotland, but had a professional career in the Spanish league.

Javier Paredes, a former defender who played for several Spanish clubs, recalled encountering Mr. Rubiales on the soccer field. "He was never going to be Messi or Zidane, but anyone who has played in the first division has my respect," Mr. Paredes said.

But Mr. Rubiales later found success off the field. During the 2008 global financial crisis, when his team, Levante UD, ran into financial troubles, Mr. Rubiales led a team strike to ensure that he and his teammates got paid.

He then became chief of the Spanish soccer players' association in 2010, according to his official biography. It was seen as a natural career move for Mr. Rubiales, who was viewed by many teammates as "someone who could defend their rights," according to Christian Lapetra, a former member of the governing board of the Spanish soccer federation.

Mr. Rubiales took over the presidency of the Royal Spanish Football Federation — Spanish soccer's governing body — in 2018.

Guillem Balagué, a Spanish football commentator, said Mr. Rubiales was initially seen as a reformer who aimed to shake things up after one of his predecessors at the federation, Ángel María Villar Llona, was arrested on corruption charges.

But Mr. Balagué said that while Mr. Rubiales "changed the faces," the system remained much the same under his leadership.

Mr. Rubiales had some successes as federation leader, including huge fund-raising, which he invested in amateur soccer clubs across the country, Mr. Balagué said. His tenure as federation chief was turbulent, however, and his management style was that of a "macho man, where you're either with him or against him," Mr. Balagué said.

One of his first decisions after taking over was to fire the men's national team coach, Julen Lopetegui, on the eve of the 2018 World Cup. Mr. Lopetegui had taken a job with Real Madrid, but did not inform the federation until five minutes before the news went public, Mr. Rubiales told reporters.

Then, in 2022, some 15 elite Spanish players refused to take the field for the women's national team amid complaints of unequal pay, intrusive treatment by their coach, Jorge Vilda, and a general culture of sexism. During the controversy Mr. Rubiales backed Mr. Vilda.

“He showed very, very little sympathy for the complaints of the female players,” said Mr. Balagué. “It was another battle for power, and Vilda was one of his guys.”

Several attempts to reach Mr. Rubiales for comment were not successful. A spokesperson for the Spanish soccer federation did not immediately respond on Tuesday afternoon to an email seeking comment.

In an interview with the Spanish newspaper El País in October 2022, Mr. Rubiales ascribed the success of the women's team to Mr. Vilda's coaching skills and dismissed allegations of ill treatment. And in his speech on Friday, he doubled down on his support for the embattled coach, vowing to increase his salary to 500,000 euros (\$543,000) after the World Cup win — Spain's first in the women's tournament.

“You deserve it,” he told the coach. “I've always said you were one of the best coaches in the world of women's soccer.”

Now, Mr. Rubiales is facing a reckoning. Ms. Hermoso was given 15 days to come forward with a formal complaint that would allow the prosecutors to proceed with their investigation, according to a prosecutor's statement.

At a news conference on Tuesday morning, Spain's acting sports minister, Miquel Iceta, when questioned about what steps the government was taking to remove Mr. Rubiales, said serious complaints had been made against him that were now in a Spanish administrative court for sporting disputes. The government would not immediately terminate him under the procedure, Mr. Iceta indicated.

“We all want this matter to be resolved as soon as possible, but we must also ensure that it is done rigorously and with all the legal guarantees,” Mr. Iceta said, adding that otherwise any decision could be reversed on appeal.

In his hometown on Saturday, Mr. Rubiales had hoped to put on his old team jersey and play a friendly game of soccer on Saturday evening at the municipal stadium. But groups threatened to protest outside the gates, and the town council ordered the match canceled to head off any possible disturbances.