

Spain's Top Soccer Official Resigns Over Unwanted World Cup Kiss

Pressure had been building on Luis Rubiales, with prosecutors opening an investigation, his soccer federation calling for him to step down and FIFA suspending him.

By Michael Wolgelenter and Rachel Chandler

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The head of the Spanish soccer federation, Luis Rubiales, resigned on Sunday, weeks after kissing a member of Spain's women's team on the lips after the team won the World Cup last month, setting off a national scandal and drawing accusations of abusing his power and perpetuating sexism in the sport.

In a statement posted to X, formerly known as Twitter, on Sunday, Mr. Rubiales said he had submitted his resignation as the federation's president and as vice president of UEFA, European soccer's governing body.

"After the rapid suspension carried out by FIFA, plus the rest of proceedings open against me, it is evident that I will not be able to return to my position," he wrote. "My daughters, my family and the people who love me have suffered the effects of persecution excessively, as well as many falsehoods, but it is also true that in the street, the truth is prevailing more every day."

Mr. Rubiales, 46, was largely unrepentant about his actions, but pressure had grown on him and the group he leads, known formally as the Royal Spanish Football Federation, and it became clear that his position was untenable as the outrage against him showed no signs of abating.

Spanish prosecutors opened a sexual assault case on Friday after the player Jennifer Hermoso, who said she was made to feel "vulnerable" and a "victim of an attack" when he kissed her, filed a formal complaint, and there were signs of opposition to his continued presence at the top of Spanish soccer at every turn.

The soccer federation had called for him to resign "immediately," female players had said they would not take the field for the national team as long as he was in charge, the men's team had condemned his actions, and FIFA, soccer's governing body, had suspended him for 90 days.

Some commentators have described the events as a watershed moment in Spain's #MeToo movement, as they put a spotlight on a divide between traditions of machismo and more recent progressivism that placed Spain in the European vanguard on issues of feminism and equality.

The controversy centers on the conduct of Mr. Rubiales, who kissed Ms. Hermoso, one of the team's star players, after Spain defeated England, 1-0, at the World Cup final in Sydney, Australia, on Aug. 20.

He offered a tepid apology the next day, but by the end of that week he had dug in his heels and reversed course, insisting that Ms. Hermoso had "moved me close to her body" during their encounter onstage, feet from the Spanish queen. He also accused his critics of targeting him in a "social assassination" and declared that he would not step down.

Ms. Hermoso has vigorously disputed his account and has received support far and wide, with players and others — including the United Nations’ human rights office — using the hashtag “se acabó,” or “it’s over.”

The Spanish government was limited in its ability to punish Mr. Rubiales, but Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez described the soccer chief’s actions as “unacceptable,” and the secretary of the opposition People’s Party, Cuca Gamarra, described them as “shameful.”

The scandal has taken some of the shine off the national team’s World Cup triumph, diverting attention from the rapid ascent to soccer glory by a squad that qualified for the tournament for the first time eight years ago after decades of mediocrity.

On Sunday evening, Mr. Rubiales gave an interview on “Piers Morgan Uncensored,” in which he said he came to the decision to resign after speaking to friends and family. “They say to me, ‘Luis, now you have to focus on your dignity and to continue your life, because if not, probably, you are going to damage people you love,’” he said.

Víctor Francos, the president of Spain’s National Sports Council, said on Onda Cero radio that Mr. Rubiales’s resignation was “good news for the government” and “what the citizens were asking for.” Minutes earlier on Cadena Ser radio, he said the government was considering “legislative changes that can improve, strengthen and enrich public control over the federations.”

“We must reflect so that certain things that have happened don’t happen again,” he said.

But Mr. Rubiales was not without his supporters.

When he spoke at a federation meeting in late August, his robust defense was met with loud applause by some in attendance, and his mother locked herself in a church and began a hunger strike to protest what she considered a witch hunt of her son.

Before Mr. Rubiales was punished, the controversy led to the ouster of another high-profile figure in the world of Spanish women’s soccer: Jorge Vilda, the coach of the World Cup winning squad but a polarizing figure, who was fired on Tuesday.

Mr. Vilda, who was hired in 2015 when his predecessor was ousted amid accusations of sexism, had been dogged by scandal in recent months. And last year, 15 star players refused to play on the national team, complaining about controlling behavior by Mr. Vilda and a general culture of sexism.

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