

New Sports Law Ensures the UAE Remains a Global Leader

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The Resolution is now the primary vehicle through which the Ministry of Interior will oversee elements of safety and security at sports events in the UAE, leveraging the police, civil defence and other relevant authorities as necessary.

Make no mistake, this is a cornerstone law for the local sports industry, so it is critical that people and companies operating within it – including event organisers, authorised private security firms, sporting regulatory bodies, fans, teams and other participants – fully understand their obligations to avoid falling foul of the law, which at its most punitive can carry serious criminal charges.

While the headline-grabbing element of the law relates to unruly fan behaviour, it actually has a wide-ranging impact; from the planning, coordination and safety behind event organisation, through to on-pitch, court or track conduct, as well as in the stands.

Clearly, we have not yet had much time to see the new law in action, so there remains some guesswork around how the rules will actually be enforced. However, knowing what those rules actually are – and ensuring you operate within them – is the best way to be confident of your legal position should an incident arise.

So, what are the critical details behind the new rules? Despite the breadth of the law, its various touchpoints can loosely be grouped under three target areas in terms of application: addressing safety and security at sporting events through (i) Facility/Venue and Organiser practices, (ii) Fan Conduct and (ii) Anti-Corruption.

Sports Facilities & Organisers

The bulk of the law relates to this area, with organisers and venue managers subject to specific new compliance requirements and oversight, aimed at ensuring the UAE is aligned with or setting global best practice.

Most notably, all sporting events should have a flexible administrative and organisational guide, including necessary measures relevant to the nature and scope of the event, as well as specifics on the venue. This guide is subject to approval by a designated police contact.

For a number of sophisticated event organisers, designing, submitting, and ultimately implementing their event management plans, in accordance with their approved guide, will essentially cement and perhaps reformulate some elements of best practices they have previously established. This could mean substantial change for some. However, they will also need to take additional steps to comply with specific protocols under the new law.

These requirements are welcome, such as the need for a designated and qualified Event Security Officer to coordinate with a Police Observer. And the use of the latest technology in communications and crowd management, effectively mandating a blend common sense with modern capabilities, to increase safety and security as appropriate for modern day sporting entertainment.

Facilities, venues and event organisers can be subject to fines of up to AED 500,000 for non-compliance with these rules.

Fan Conduct

Sports fans face tougher fines for criminal actions conducted at events or venues. The law does not replace the existing Penal Code in such circumstances but it does complement it. This means that committing any Penal Code offence at a sporting event will now be considered an aggravating factor, so would be likely to attract greater punishment than if it had been committed elsewhere.

There will also now be formalised crowd restrictions on entering the field of play, bringing prohibited or dangerous materials into a venue, taking to or acquiring weapons inside a venue, violent conduct, throwing materials, insulting or racially abusing or gesturing other people, disregarding facility rules, and using a venue for political purposes.

There are numerous other restrictions but generally speaking the changes bring the UAE legally into line with global best practice when it comes to the conduct of fans. Breaking the law can now have dramatic consequences. Depending on the severity of the crime, it can result in imprisonment of three months and fines up to AED 30,000.

Anti-Corruption

Given what is unfolding in global sport at present – with the likes of FIFA, the IAAF and various other recognised international sporting bodies facing intense scrutiny around their actions – this aspect of the UAE law is not only timely but in some ways pioneering. In essence, it removes a significant chunk of self-regulation from sporting bodies and brings it under federal law.

Cheating, fraud or corruption in gaining rights to host a sporting event can now be punishable by a fine of up to AED 1 million, plus liability for certain costs. We should keep a keen eye on the interpretation and scope of enforcement of this particular provision, to see if its application could be used more broadly to address some of the issues surrounding match-fixing and cheating that we know have plagued international sports in recent times.

With this in mind, UAE could be taking a welcome and a significantly pro-active position to protect the integrity of its sporting events. The law could provide a platform for broader tackling of corruption in sports to be specifically identified and punishable through a sports-specific statute, in addition to the measures within the UAE Penal Code already applicable to such conduct.

Of course, the full implementation and impact of these new rules is yet to be seen. But, they are potentially far reaching in their scope. However, they should be welcomed in terms of trying to ensure that the UAE, which already hosts some of the world's most popular sporting events and may have aspirations to host the Olympics, remains at the forefront of the global sporting events sector. Nonetheless, new rules need to be properly understood for companies and individuals to act within their boundaries. Getting this right will take time and significant effort but guarantee the law is a success in practice and not just on paper.

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