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The Final Lap of Justice: Reforming FIA Governance in Formula 1

Amerenthiran Anantha Murugan and Lahveenya Panchalingam

Faculty of Law, Multimedia University, MY

Corresponding author: Amerenthiran Anantha Murugan (amerenthiran9263@gmail.com)

The management of Formula 1 by The Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) is critically examined in this essay, with an emphasis on claims of bias and how they affect the sport's legitimacy. Using a jurisprudential lens, the study examines the neutrality principle in sports governance, examining major controversies including Spygate and the 2021 Abu Dhabi Grand Prix (McCartney 2024). This study assesses the FIA's compliance with international legal standards of impartiality and fairness using case studies and comparisons with other international sports organisations such as Fédération Internationale de Football Association and the International Olympic Committee. The results point to weaknesses in FIA governance's accountability, openness, and regulatory uniformity. The paper suggests several changes to solve these problems, such as increased transparency, impartial oversight procedures, and implementing best practices from other sports organisations. These suggestions are intended to protect F1's future and enhance the FIA's function as an impartial regulator.

Keywords: FIA; Formula 1; Motorsports; Sports Governance; Bias; Sporting Integrity

Introduction

Context of Formula 1 and the FIA

When it comes to motorsports, Formula 1 is the pinnacle of it all. The combination of the world's best drivers in the world's fastest cars, and reaching a total audience of 750 million, F1 is one of the biggest sports in the world today (Brown 2024). Formula 1 has developed into a multibillion-dollar industry since its inaugural season in 1950, enthraling viewers on every continent with its unique fusion of competition, innovation, and spectacle. The Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) serves as the governing body of Formula 1, responsible for overseeing the championship by regulating the sport and ensuring fair competition. However, its governance has been subject to scrutiny, with critics arguing that certain decisions have lacked transparency and consistency.

The FIA has existed since 1904, but its role as the regulatory authority of Formula 1 only became prominent after the sport's establishment. After first functioning under the name Fédération Internationale du Sport Automobile (FISA) in the 1970s and 1980s, the organisation reorganised into the FIA in 1993 to simplify its governance structure. Enforcing technical rules, resolving conflicts, and advancing safety standards while maintaining the competitive integrity of the sport are all part of the FIA's mandate.

The FIA has been accused of bias and inconsistent decision-making, despite its professed dedication to objectivity. Debates concerning its neutrality have been triggered by high-profile disputes, which range from decisions on technical violations to racing incidents including championship-deciding confrontations. These concerns are especially important because the FIA regulates and promotes motorsport, which raises concerns about possible conflicts of interest.

It has been more difficult to balance the interests of teams, drivers, spectators, and business partners as Formula 1 develops. The integrity of the sport and the development of confidence among its participants depend heavily on the FIA's capacity to remain impartial. This paper delves into noteworthy case studies and legal frameworks to evaluate the FIA's performance and suggest reform paths to critically analyse the legal and regulatory obstacles it faces in attaining impartial governance.

Significance of neutrality in sports governance

The idea of neutrality is to maintain objectivity, impartiality, and freedom from influence or partiality. It is crucial in areas like government, law, and sports laws where impartiality and fairness are required.

In order to guarantee fair competition and equitable treatment for all participants, neutrality is crucial in sports governance. In motorsport, impartial governance is both morally and legally required because regulatory decisions made by organisations such as the FIA have a direct impact on race results, championship standings, and careers. Neutrality,

which has its roots in ideas such as procedural justice and the rule of law, is consistent with jurisprudential views developed by academics such as Lon Fuller and John Rawls (Miller 2017). These principles, which are supported by the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), place a strong emphasis on justice and openness, which regulatory organisations such as the FIA must uphold in order to remain honest.

Lack of objectivity can harm a sport's image and undermine confidence among competitors, stakeholders, supporters, and even Liberty Media Corp., the owners of the sport. Bias, perceived or actual, erodes the validity of competition and shatters the financial and emotional commitments made to the sport. Neutrality also protects the intricate contracts that link the FIA, teams, sponsors, and owners of commercial rights. Legal challenges resulting from perceived prejudice might jeopardise Formula 1's brand and financial viability.

The paper uses a legal perspective to analyse neutrality in sports governance, evaluating the FIA's compliance with these guidelines and its wider ramifications for Formula 1. This study emphasises the vital role that neutrality plays in maintaining the integrity of motorsport by examining significant controversies and contrasting FIA procedures with international legal standards such as the International Olympic Committee and Fédération Internationale de Football Association.

Research Questions

- How does the principle of neutrality of sports governance apply to the FIA's decision-making processes in Formula 1?
- What are the legal implications of perceived or actual bias in FIA rulings, and how have these been addressed historically?
- What frameworks or reforms can be implemented to enhance impartiality and fairness in FIA's governance?
- How does the FIA's dual role as both regulator and promoter of motorsport contribute to potential conflicts of interest?

Research Objectives

- To critically examine the application of neutrality as a legal principle in the FIA's governance of Formula 1
- To explore the legal ramifications of bias in FIA governance by using case studies to understand its impact on stakeholders
- To identify and propose frameworks or reforms that could enhance the FIA's neutrality and governance practices
- To assess the FIA's dual responsibilities and their potential influence on its governance decisions

The FIA's Role and Structure

Formation and mandate of the FIA

The Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) was founded in 1904 to represent motoring organizations globally, initially focusing on promoting automobile use and international collaboration. Over time, it expanded to govern and regulate motorsport, taking control of major racing series like Formula 1 and the World Rally Championship, cementing its role as a key authority in motorsport regulation, which was solidified through international recognition, agreements with governing bodies, and its historical role in unifying motorsport governance.

The Fédération Internationale du Sport Automobile (FISA), the FIA's sports branch, oversaw motorsport governance in the 1970s and 1980s. The necessity for structural reform was made clear by internal disputes, such as the 'FISA-FOCA war' between two now-defunct representative organisations, FISA and the Formula One Constructors Association (FOCA) (Tomlinson 2020). FISA's activities were completely incorporated into the FIA by 1993, which simplified governance for increased effectiveness and accountability.

Road safety (FIA 2024), environmental sustainability (Mittal 2024), and racing regulation are all part of the FIA's mandate. To guarantee fair competition, it creates technical, sporting, and safety regulations, grants licences to competitors and circuits, and applies penalties. Although the organisation claims to be impartial in its governance, there have been doubts about its capacity to remain impartial, especially when making choices that affect the results of competitions. Similar issues have been brought up in other motorsport series, like NASCAR, where continuous legal disputes pertaining to antitrust law underscore the difficulties in upholding impartiality and fairness in governance (Pockrass 2025). Recent disagreements have called into question whether regulatory rulings unjustly limit competition, which has wider ramifications for how athletic authorities administer their authority.

In a complicated international industry, the FIA strikes a balance between commerce, competitiveness, and ethics under the guidance of its laws and the International Sporting Code (ISC). Its many responsibilities, however, frequently call into question its objectivity, particularly in high-stakes scenarios where government and business interests collide. Individual racetracks also have a big say in this regulatory structure because promoters and track owners frequently have a stake in making sure their events run well, which can occasionally conflict with the FIA's larger governance goals.

Regulatory framework and jurisdiction

International motorsport is governed by the FIA's regulatory framework, which is based on the foundational statutes and the International Sporting Code (ISC). The FIA's main regulatory tool is the ISC, which is modified frequently to reflect safety, technical advancements, and changing concerns. These rules try to ensure fair play and conformity to international standards by directing rule enforcement, safety requirements, and competition integrity.

The FIA has the power to licence drivers and teams, approve and grade racing circuits, establish technical specifications for racing cars, and enforce sporting regulations. Agreements with National Sporting Authorities (ASNs), which uphold FIA regulations nationally and foster harmony between regional demands and international standardisation, lend support to this system. To maintain procedural fairness, external appeals are allowed through the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), while internal entities such as the FIA International Court of Appeal (ICA) and International Tribunal handle dispute resolution.

The Concorde Agreement (Hardy 2024), which regulates Formula 1's sport and finances, presents difficulties in striking a balance between regulatory independence and commercial interests. The need for increased accountability and transparency is highlighted by claims of uneven rule enforcement, like as that which occurred during the 2021 Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, a highly controversial incident which will be discussed later in this paper. These problems show how crucial it is to keep examining and improving FIA rules to maintain fairness and impartiality in the governance of motorsports.

Notably, the upcoming 2026 Concorde Agreement is poised to introduce several significant changes to F1's governance structure. Redefining the financial distribution model among teams is one of its notable goals. There have been suggestions of capping Ferrari's historical bonus payout at 5% of the entire prize budget. With an emphasis on improving sustainability and competition, the new agreement is also anticipated to be in line with a significant revision of technical regulations, especially those pertaining to power units. These changes show that Formula 1 is moving towards a more environmentally responsible and financially balanced future.

Governing bodies and decision-making processes

The hierarchy of bodies that make up the FIA's governance structure guarantees that its policies are developed, implemented, and enforced in an efficient manner. The main decision-making body, the General Assembly (FIA 2024), is at the heart of it. It offers general supervision and exemplifies the FIA's dedication to inclusive global governance by having a varied membership. The World Motor Sport Council (WMSC), which regulates motorsport, authorises technical and athletic regulations, and settles important regulatory issues to guarantee the seamless running of races, supports this.

By resolving infractions of the International Sporting Code (ISC), judicial entities such as the FIA Court of Appeal and International Tribunal preserve regulatory integrity. These organisations function autonomously and serve as a crucial compliance check. By providing unbiased arbitration for disputes and bringing FIA decision-making into line with more general international sports law standards, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) significantly strengthens trust in the FIA's governance.

The decision-making process is deepened by specialised panels and commissions. These commissions, which are made up of stakeholders and technical experts, create proposed regulations that are then examined and approved by the WMSC. Stewards selected by the FIA are essential to events because they interpret and enforce rules, handle problems as they arise, and make sure races adhere to set standards. The FIA's intention to balance stakeholder input and technical competence in its governance methods is demonstrated by its multi-tiered system.

But criticisms about the FIA's subjectivity and inconsistent decisions have brought attention to areas that require improvement. Proposals for increased openness and procedural justice have been sparked by high-profile instances and apparent differences in punishment. These issues would be resolved by enhancing decision-making impartiality and simplifying procedures, guaranteeing the integrity of the FIA's governance. Both the FIA's strengths and places for improvement are highlighted by this examination of its governing bodies and decision-making procedures; pertinent case studies will be used to further examine these points.

There have been a number of high-profile events that have brought attention to the FIA's subjectivity and inconsistencies. The decision to replace Michael Masi was influenced, for instance, by the contentious conclusion of the 2021 Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, which sparked questions regarding race director interventions and procedural consistency. More recently, charges of favouritism have been stoked by discussions about how lenient Red Bull was with regard to their 2021 cost cap violation in comparison to other teams' prior financial violations. The necessity for increased standardisation and transparency in FIA governance is demonstrated by these incidents.

Understanding Bias and Fairness in Sports Law

Definition and types of bias

The definition of 'bias' according to the Cambridge dictionary is the 'action of supporting or opposing a particular person or thing in an unfair way, because of allowing personal opinions to influence your judgement'. Bias compromises the impartiality, equality, and fairness that are fundamental to legitimate governance in the context of sports law. Actual bias and perceived bias are the two main ways that prejudice can appear, and each has unique ramifications for regulating organisations such as the FIA.

Actual bias may take place due to many reasons; some of them may be where the judge is a party to the litigation or has a financial or other interest in its outcome (Brown 2018). It frequently results from preexisting commitments that impede objectivity, financial interests, or personal relationships. *Nemo iudex in causa sua*, which means 'no one should be a judge in their own cause', is a legal principle that is broken by actual bias. The 2007 'Spygate' controversy is one instance of actual bias that is frequently brought up in discussions about motorsport governance. In this instance, McLaren was penalised for having Ferrari's confidential technical information in its possession. The FIA barred McLaren

from the Constructors' Championship and issued an extraordinary \$100 million fine (Nichol 2023). The decision's critics suggested that the severity of the fines might have been impacted by personal conflicts between FIA President Max Mosley and some McLaren executives. This controversy continues to serve as a point of reference for conversations on how personal dynamics can give rise to accusations of bias, even though the FIA presented the sentence as proportionate to the infringement.

Max Verstappen and Lewis Hamilton's contentious 2021 Abu Dhabi Grand Prix incident is another noteworthy example of perceived bias. Many claimed that Verstappen unfairly profited from the FIA's decision to only permit some lapped vehicles to un-lap themselves, which sparked widespread claims of inconsistent rule enforcement. This led to discussions over whether commercial motives, outside forces, or an effort to create an exciting ending influenced regulatory decisions. The event ultimately resulted in modifications to FIA race control protocols, underscoring the need for regulatory reforms and the erosion of trust in motorsport governance caused by alleged bias.

Although less obvious, perceived bias can be just as harmful. It happens when there is a plausible suspicion of injustice, even in the absence of concrete proof to back up claims of partiality (Dagher 2022). Because it calls into question the integrity of decision-makers, this kind of bias erodes confidence in governance. Allegations of perceived biasness gained prominence during the rivalry between Ayrton Senna and Alain Prost in the late 1980s. Senna was disqualified following a collision with Prost during the 1989 Japanese Grand Prix, which gave Prost the championship title. Claims of favouritism were fuelled by accusations that Jean-Marie Balestre, the then-President of FISA, had intervened in a way that favoured Prost (Macmillen 2022). Senna strongly criticised Balestre, claiming that the result was influenced by political considerations.

There are serious repercussions for sports governance from both perceived and actual bias. Perceived bias damages stakeholder confidence and trust, whereas actual bias calls into question the validity of decisions and may result in legal challenges. Avoiding these types of bias is crucial because their existence can permanently damage the standing of regulatory organisations like the FIA. Through an analysis of these cases, this study seeks to emphasise the need for impartiality, openness, and uniformity in regulatory decision-making in the settings of motorsport and more general sports legislation.

Additionally, from a business standpoint, inconsistent regulations can undermine motorsports' financial stability because sponsors and investors could be reluctant to work with an organisation that they believe to be unjust. Because these kinds of bias have the potential to permanently harm the reputation of regulatory bodies such as the FIA, it is imperative that they be avoided. This study aims to highlight the necessity of impartiality, transparency, and consistency in regulatory decision-making in the context of motorsport and more general sports regulation by analysing these cases.

Legal framework for fairness in International Sports Law

International legal standards that guarantee justice, consistency, and impartiality serve as the foundation for fairness in sports governance. Following these guidelines is essential to the FIA's continued legitimacy as a motorsport's authority. The foundation of fairness is impartiality, and both FIFA and IOC statutes uphold the idea of "nemo iudex in causa sua", highlighting how important it is to have strong protocols in place to prevent favouritism.

Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which guarantees equal opportunity for all disputants before an unbiased tribunal, protects the right to a fair hearing. The Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) which may be appointed by the FIA, provides external, independent assessment, further supports this approach, which is operationalised through the FIA's judicial authorities, including the International Tribunal and Court of Appeal.

Another important principle is that sanctions should be proportionate. The \$100 million fine McLaren received in the 2007 Spygate case sparked debate about whether the penalty was appropriate for the crime or influenced by other forces (The Guardian 2007). Because different punishments for similar offences undermine public confidence in government, consistency and non-discrimination are equally important.

In contrast, the 2013 Mercedes 'Tyregate' scandal involved claims of undue advantage after Mercedes used their current Formula 1 car to undertake a private Pirelli tyre test (Benson 2013). Unlike McLaren's \$100 million fine in 2007, Mercedes received a relatively lenient punishment, which was a reprimand and exclusion from a single young driver test. Discussions about uneven FIA regulatory enforcement and whether penalties were impacted by extraneous circumstances were sparked by this disparity in sanctions. These differences show how crucial it is to maintain consistency and proportionality in decision-making in order to preserve public confidence in sports governance.

The FIA views adherence to these global standards as both a legal requirement and a strategic imperative. The FIA can increase the legitimacy of its governance and reduce the possibility of bias by coordinating its regulatory framework with these principles. But disputes over its rulings in well-known instances highlight areas that would require modification to guarantee more openness, uniformity, and commitment to justice. In later parts of this paper, this framework will be used as the foundation for assessing the FIA's governance procedures and pinpointing areas in need of development.

The FIA is not alone in this problem, as regulatory organisations in other sports frequently have disputes about their decisions. For example, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has faced controversy over doping sanctions, and FIFA has been chastised for inconsistent disciplinary proceedings. These incidents underscore the more general difficulty of guaranteeing equity and openness in sports administration, so reaffirming the necessity of ongoing regulatory improvement to preserve legitimacy and public confidence.

Impact of bias on legal standards and sporting integrity

The fundamental principles of neutrality and fairness in international sports law and governance are compromised by bias, whether actual or perceived. It puts into question fundamental rights that are protected by the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) and legal frameworks such as the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), including equality before the law, due process, and fair trials. Bias undermines stakeholder trust and exposes regulatory authorities to legal challenges, as demonstrated by cases such as the 2021 Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, where rule interpretations seemed to favour one competitor.

The credibility of regulatory frameworks is further harmed by inconsistent application of legal criteria. Sanctions during the Senna-Prost rivalry (Dagless 2023), and incidents like 'Crashgate' (Deeley 2023), serve as examples of how perceived partiality erodes trust in just administration. Stakeholder confidence in the sport and its regulating bodies declines, endangering the integrity of competition, when they believe that outside forces affect decisions rather than fair rule enforcement.

The broader sports ecosystem is also impacted by bias, which influences economics and reputation. Sports are seen as fair and meritocratic, which is why sponsors and other stakeholders invest in them. By alienating these stakeholders, accusations of bias might lower marketability and discourage competent players. To ensure that integrity stays at the core of Formula 1, the FIA must place a high priority on open governance, robust conflict-of-interest procedures, and compliance with international legal requirements.

Different nations have different views on whether sports are meritocratic, depending on things like political meddling, governance systems, and economic circumstances. While some countries have a strong dedication to transparency and justice, others have problems like nepotism, corruption, and favouritism that can compromise the fairness of sporting events.

Jurisprudential context

Understanding prejudice and fairness in sports law requires a jurisprudential viewpoint because these ideas are derived from legal and ethical conceptions that influence regulatory systems. Justice and the function of governing bodies in upholding impartiality are clarified by the theories of Rawls, Fuller, and Dworkin.

John Rawls' concept of justice as fairness places a strong emphasis on making decisions objectively and establishing norms devoid of prejudice (Wenar 2021). This is crucial for sports governance because, especially in tense circumstances like the 2021 Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, legitimacy and confidence are maintained through openness and adherence to established regulations. Like this, Lon Fuller's idea of procedural justice emphasises how crucial consistency, clarity, and avoiding arbitrary decisions are to guaranteeing the legitimacy of a system (Waldron 2016). Credibility is damaged by shortcomings in these areas, such as erratic stewardship or unclear enforcement.

Ronald Dworkin's idea of law as integrity, which holds that judgements should be rendered in accordance with the values of equality and justice. Dworkin maintained that those in charge of making decisions ought to interpret the law in a way that supports the larger moral and ethical norms of the society they are responsible for (Wagner 2013). This suggests that the FIA should base its decisions on the principles of sportsmanship and fair competition, making sure that they are both morally and legally sound.

It's true that Dworkin's view of integrity in the law has drawn criticism. His method, according to others, is overly optimistic as it presumes that judges always apply the law in a way that makes sense morally. His dependence on a single 'right answer' in legal interpretation is often criticised for being unrealistic, particularly in circumstances that are complicated or politically motivated and may have more than one equally valid interpretation.

By using these jurisprudential frameworks, sport's governing organisations such as the FIA can improve accountability, transparency, and uniformity while addressing significant reform areas.

Case Studies of Alleged Bias in F1

Spygate

One of Formula 1's most notorious scandals is the Spygate controversy from 2007, which involved claims of industrial espionage and concerns about the fairness of the FIA's investigation. The main cause of the event was the disclosure of Ferrari's private technical data to rival team McLaren. Significant questions concerning justice, the consistency of sanctions, and whether outside influences impacted the governing body's decision-making were brought up by the scandal's aftermath.

Nigel Stepney, Ferrari's head technician, was accused of giving McLaren's chief designer, Mike Coughlan, a significant quantity of confidential technical information, which sparked the dispute. When a photocopying shop reported suspicious activity relating to copying Ferrari documents, the information which included specifics about Ferrari's automobile setup and engineering secrets was uncovered. The FIA investigated as a result, and claims that McLaren had profited from the stolen data were made.

Although McLaren first denied utilising the data, the FIA concluded in July 2007 that although McLaren had access to Ferrari's data, there was not enough proof to demonstrate that it had affected the performance of their vehicle. But when more evidence surfaced, like as emails between McLaren drivers Fernando Alonso and Pedro de la Rosa, indicating that Ferrari's data was being discussed and maybe used within the team, the issue became more heated.

When the FIA re-examined the matter in September 2007, McLaren received an extraordinary punishment: a \$100 million fine and exclusion from the Constructors' Championship for that season. McLaren's drivers were permitted to compete in the Drivers' Championship despite the harsh punishment, a decision that prompted claims of partiality and inconsistency. The drivers, who were involved through their email, were questioned by critics as to why they were not punished with the team.

Significant discussion concerning the FIA's impartiality and the appropriateness of its sanctions resulted from its handling of Spygate. Given McLaren's significant position in the sport, several contended that the record-breaking sanction was disproportionate and might have been influenced by commercial concerns. Others believed that the ruling was an essential deterrent to preserve Formula 1's credibility. However, the choice to spare McLaren's drivers stoked rumours that the FIA was hesitant to interfere with the championship duel between Fernando Alonso and Lewis Hamilton, two important players.

Spygate highlighted how difficult it is to oversee a sport with fierce rivalries and big stakes where accusations of favouritism are common. Due to the FIA's perceived compassion towards certain people and severity towards others, the episode demonstrated the value of openness and consistency in adjudication. It is still a crucial case study for analysing how perceived or real prejudice might affect the legitimacy of sports governance.

Abu Dhabi 2021

One of the latest and the biggest controversies is what happened during the final laps of the final race of the 2021 season, which was the 2021 Abu Dhabi Grand Prix. Going into the race, Max Verstappen from The Netherlands and the British Lewis Hamilton were both level on points. Hamilton was gunning for his eighth title, while Verstappen was aiming for his first. Either way, history would be made, as no one has ever won eight world championships, and no Dutch driver has won a single world championship.

The beginning of the controversy was when a safety car was deployed after Nicholas Latifi crashed into a wall during the race's final stages. Verstappen, who was in second place now, pitted for new tires, while Hamilton, who was in the lead and seemed certain to win his eighth World Championship, decided not to pit. Importantly, Verstappen and Hamilton were separated on the track by a group of lapped cars.

Normally, for a race to restart after a safety car, all lapped cars would have to be allowed to unlap themselves. Only after the lapped cars have unlapped themselves, the race would then restart. But in this race, Michael Masi, the Race Director for the FIA, made an unprecedented decision to keep other lapped cars in place and only permit the cars between Hamilton and Verstappen to unlap themselves before the race resumed. This choice deviated from the standard practice, which calls for all lapped vehicles to either unlap themselves or none. This decision resulted in a 'one lap showdown' between Hamilton and Verstappen. Due to Verstappen's fresher tires, he very easily overtook Hamilton, went on to win the race, and the 2021 championship (Medland 2021).

Mercedes and its fans were among the first to criticise the decision to only permit the cars between Hamilton and Verstappen to unlap themselves. They claimed that this unjustly favoured Verstappen and broke existing regulations. However, Red Bull and its backers backed the ruling, saying it gave the championship a more thrilling and competitive ending.

Critics accused the FIA of being biased and inconsistent, claiming that the decision was made for commercial reasons and to guarantee a spectacular season finale. Although the governing body justified its decision by claiming that it was intended to restart racing rather than finish it behind a safety car, the controversy cast doubt on the fairness and transparency of its decision-making procedures.

The FIA announced reforms to its governance structure after launching an internal assessment in response to the criticism. Among these were the removal of Michael Masi as Race Director and the establishment of a rotating system of race directors to lessen personal responsibility for crucial choices. To improve openness and uniformity, new safety car protocols and team-to-race official communication protocols were also implemented.

The Abu Dhabi 2021 events continue to be a contentious issue in Formula 1, with some seeing them as a case of biased and bad governance and others seeing them as a single, regrettable instance of a high-pressure choice gone awry. In any case, the situation made it abundantly evident how important it is to make decisions in a clear, consistent, and transparent manner to preserve the integrity of the sport and the confidence of its stakeholders.

Historical patterns: Treatment of certain teams by the FIA

The way the FIA has treated certain teams throughout the years has generated discussions over consistency and fairness. Ferrari, who are often considered as Formula 1's most iconic team, has been seen as enjoying preferential treatment historically. This impression was strengthened by Ferrari's much-maligned 'veto power' in talks, which gave them undue influence over regulatory decisions (Noble 2019). Smaller teams, like the now extinct Minardi and Sauber, on the other hand, have frequently felt marginalised and received little assistance during regulatory issues, underscoring an imbalance in the FIA's governance style.

Furthermore, the competition between Mercedes and Red Bull Racing during the hybrid era brought to light inequalities in the application of technological restrictions. Allegations of favouritism were fuelled by critics who claimed that certain rule interpretations, such as those pertaining to flexible wings (Barretto 2021), or engine modes, seemed

to favour one team over another. These trends highlight the necessity of consistent rule enforcement to maintain confidence and competitive integrity in Formula 1.

Investigations and reforms: FIA's responses and rule amendments

The FIA has been heavily criticised throughout the years for its perceived bias, inconsistent governance, and handling of controversies. To address these problems, the organisation has conducted a few investigations and implemented changes to strengthen its regulatory structure, increase openness, and rebuild confidence in its decision-making procedures. The goal of these reforms has been to address both occurrences and more general structural issues with Formula 1 governance.

Following the discovery of proof of industrial espionage involving Ferrari's technical data, the FIA banned McLaren from the Constructors' Championship and slapped an unprecedented \$100 million fine on the team in Spygate. Although the decision to permit McLaren's drivers to continue racing in the Drivers' Championship was criticised for being inconsistent, it did represent a major increase in the governing body's approach to rule enforcement.

Additionally, there was a great deal of outrage and an internal assessment because of the FIA's contentious judgements made during the latter laps of the 2021 Abu Dhabi Grand Prix. Consequently, the FIA made several adjustments, such as replacing Race Director Michael Masi, introducing a system of race directors who rotated, and updating safety car procedures (F1 2022). The goal of these actions was to increase race management's uniformity and openness.

To prevent future problems, the FIA has made a number of more significant adjustments to its governance and regulatory structure in addition to resolving specific disputes. By expanding the number of independent stewards and changing the makeup of the stewarding panel at each race, the FIA has attempted to lessen the possibility of perceived bias. The goal of this reform is to guarantee consistency and fairness in decision-making.

Reactions to the FIA's initiatives to lessen prejudice and enhance governance have been conflicting. Some stakeholders contend that decision-making discrepancies still exist, while others value the greater transparency and structural improvements. Critics point to instances in which stewarding choices continue to be contentious, implying that impressions of partiality have not entirely been eradicated by reforms. In order to guarantee equity for all competitors, certain teams and drivers have also demanded more uniformity in the application of the rules.

The FIA has implemented more stringent enforcement procedures and more comprehensive technical rules in reaction to disputes like the 2003 tyre width clarification and the 2021 flexible rear wing controversy. These steps are intended to lessen uncertainty and stop teams from taking advantage of regulation ambiguities.

The FIA updated its team-radio communication guidelines in the wake of the Abu Dhabi 2021 controversy, restricting direct communication between team principals and the Race Director during races (Pisa 2022). This modification aims to improve the integrity of on-track decisions and lessen excessive pressure on authorities. To handle more general issues of governance and guarantee adherence to the values of impartiality and fairness, the FIA has set up ethical committees and compliance initiatives. The goals of these programmes are to encourage responsibility and rebuild trust in the governing body's function.

The FIA still has difficulties upholding consistency and impartiality despite these adjustments. Allegations of bias may continue because of Formula 1's financial pressures, the intricacy of its rules, and the high stakes involved in decision-making. Nonetheless, the FIA's readiness to investigate and change its procedures shows that it recognises these problems and is dedicated to enhancing the sport's governance.

The FIA wants to maintain the integrity of Formula 1 as an internationally renowned competition and enhance its function as an unbiased regulator by taking lessons from previous scandals and making structural adjustments. Inconsistent stewarding judgements, such as the 2023 Singapore GP track limitations, demonstrate that disputes still exist despite the FIA's initiatives to enhance governance and lessen bias. Teams and drivers contend that financial and political influences continue to affect decisions, despite officials' claims that these adjustments improve fairness. The conflicting reactions show how difficult it is still to establish genuine impartiality in Formula 1 governance.

Legal Implications of Bias in the FIA's Decision-Making

FIA's responsibility for bias

The FIA's accountability for mitigating prejudice in its governance is contingent upon internal protocols, compliance with global legal norms, and external evaluation. With internal investigations and sanctions put in place in incidents like Crashgate and Abu Dhabi 2021, its rules and codes of ethics are intended to guarantee neutrality. However, because decision-making bodies like the World Motor Sport Council may include people with conflicts of interest, putting the organization's reputation ahead of fair justice, internal accountability is frequently criticised for lacking independence and transparency.

The Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), offers external accountability. The 1999 Ferrari case serves as an example of how the FIA might be held liable under sports law through appeals to CAS (O'Keefe 2002). CAS rulings, however, are restricted to the field of sports law and might not cover more general legal obligations. Smaller teams are further discouraged from pursuing arbitration due to its high costs and complexity. Legal regimes frequently respect the autonomy of sporting organisations, but on occasion, national courts and international tribunals step in, as seen by the EU's probe into FIA governance for anti-competitive actions (European Union 2021).

The FIA is held accountable in large part by public scrutiny and media criticism. Reactive adjustments have been driven by high-profile crises such as Spygate and Abu Dhabi 2021, illustrating the influence of outside pressure. Due to the subjective character of choices and the impact of political and commercial forces in Formula 1, it is still challenging to prove bias. The FIA must improve its independence, transparency, and readiness to accept close examination to guarantee effective accountability and preserve Formula 1's standing as a fair and competitive sport.

Precedents where sports bodies have been held accountable for bias

The means available to combat unjust management are demonstrated by cases where sport's governing organisations have been held liable for bias. Gold medals were given to Canadian figure skaters Jamie Salé and David Pelletier at the 2002 Winter Olympics when it was discovered through investigations that a French judge had been influenced to give preference to Russian skaters (Beard 2022). Significant changes were made to figure skating scoring because of the public outcry to lessen subjective bias.

The European Court of Justice's 2004 Bosman ruling in football held UEFA liable for unfair player transfer policies under EU competition law (Scott 2004). The case demonstrated how sports organisations are vulnerable to judicial scrutiny when their governance compromises fairness, even if it was not specifically about refereeing prejudice. Like this, the Indian Supreme Court stepped in to address claims of bias and wrongdoing in the Indian Premier League (IPL) in 2013 (ALJAZEERA 2013), revealing governance weaknesses in the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) and resulting in changes to the leadership.

These examples demonstrate that internal reforms, arbitration, and judicial interventions are effective in holding sports bodies accountable. For the FIA, proactive governance changes are essential to prevent external scrutiny and preserve its reputation. Allegations of bias that conflict with human rights, competition law, or contractual obligations could invite outside intervention, further emphasising the importance of transparency and fairness in its decision-making processes.

Challenges in proving bias

It is intrinsically difficult to prove bias in the decision-making procedures of regulating organisations such as the FIA, especially in a complicated and commercialised setting like Formula 1. Real or perceived bias frequently results from complex procedures that lack hard data, making it challenging to enforce accountability.

One major obstacle is that many FIA judgements are subjective. Under pressure, officials frequently must make snap decisions based on faulty or changing information. Despite the desire for impartiality, choices might be swayed by unconscious prejudices or outside influences, making it challenging to discern between sincere mistakes and deliberate partiality.

The situation is made more difficult by the FIA's opaque practices. The internal discussions that go into judgements are kept secret, even while verdicts and updates to regulations are made public. This makes it more difficult for interested parties to assess impartiality, especially when there are no transparent hearings or thorough records available, such as control room data, steward meeting minutes, radio communications, or telemetry data.

It also takes a ton of evidence to prove prejudice. Legal requirements need verifiable evidence of conflicts of interest or prejudice, such as recorded undue influence. Due to the rarity of this kind of evidence, most accusations remain unsupported.

The problem is made worse by the commercial and political aspects of Formula 1. Although accusations frequently imply partiality towards financially important stakeholders, it is practically hard to establish a clear connection between commercial pressures and actions because these impacts are informal.

Similar issues come up in cricket and football, where leagues and regulating bodies are sometimes accused of showing preference for certain big clubs, franchises, or sponsors. In football, for example, discussions about scheduling, financial fair play enforcement, and VAR rulings frequently imply that wealthier clubs are given preference. Similar concerns regarding political and commercial biases influencing cricket's governance are brought up by the BCCI's and other big bodies' influence over ICC rulings. Whether or whether they are supported, these beliefs fuel mistrust among stakeholders and fans.

Another level of intricacy is introduced by public perception. Patterns that favour particular teams or drivers are examples of circumstantial evidence that feeds media and fan scepticism. These impressions undermine confidence in the FIA and increase calls for responsibility, even in cases when legal requirements for bias are not fulfilled. Increased procedural fairness, independent scrutiny, and transparency are necessary to meet these issues. In the absence of such steps, allegations of prejudice will keep eroding trust in FIA management and jeopardising Formula 1's standing as an equitable, competitive sport.

Mechanisms for Ensuring Fairness in Decision Making

Role of the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS)

In cases involving the FIA, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) acts as an unbiased adjudicator, guaranteeing that rulings are based on justice and legal standards. Arbitration provisions in contracts that bind Formula 1 competitors provide CAS its power, mandating that disagreements be settled through its independent platform as opposed to con-

ventional courts. As seen in instances such as Ferrari's 1999 Malaysian Grand Prix appeal (Law 1999), this mechanism offers an essential check on FIA power by permitting appeals on matters ranging from technical infractions to charges of bias.

CAS has limits despite its impartiality. Smaller teams may be deterred from pursuing claims by the lengthy and costly arbitration procedure. Furthermore, it is challenging to resolve systemic concerns because CAS rulings are limited by the FIA's current standards. However, by guaranteeing that decisions are free from institutional bias, CAS continues to be an essential tool for maintaining power balance and bolstering confidence in FIA governance and governance alike.

Internal reforms and safeguards in FIA decision-making

To increase equity and openness in its decision-making procedures, the FIA has implemented a number of reforms. Reducing conflicts of interest is the goal of structural adjustments such as separating operational and regulatory duties and designating independent stewards. Clearer guidelines and less chances for misunderstandings or accusations of partiality are now guaranteed by improved regulations that eliminate ambiguity.

After controversies like the 2021 Abu Dhabi Grand Prix and 'Crashgate', the FIA releases thorough post-race findings, penalty explanations, and procedural evaluations in an effort to promote openness. To further encourage impartiality, efforts are being made to diversify decision-making bodies by including professionals with a range of backgrounds. Even though there are still issues, these changes show the FIA's dedication to restoring confidence and preserving the integrity of Formula 1.

External oversight and accountability in FIA decision-making

In order to hold the FIA responsible, external oversight is essential. Regulatory agencies have the authority to investigate possible legal standard infractions, and corporate stakeholders like sponsors and media partners put pressure on Formula 1 to uphold integrity and safeguard its brand around the world. Social media and independent journalism increase public scrutiny of controversial decisions, which frequently forces the FIA to examine its procedures. The FIA's conformity to global governance norms is further strengthened by partnerships with international institutions such as UNESCO. By working in tandem, these outside tools support the FIA's internal reforms and guarantee that its governance continues to be open, unbiased, and answerable to stakeholders. Together, these initiatives aim to ensure at least a fundamental level of fairness and accountability in the sport.

Recommendations for Mitigating Bias in FIA Governance

Enhancing ways teams and drivers can contest FIA's decisions

Fostering a more equitable governance system requires enhancing the ability of teams and drivers to contest FIA decisions. Appeals are currently handled by CAS or FIA committees; however, these processes might be extended for greater openness and accessibility. Creating an independent review body within the FIA that is only focussed on post-event appeals is one way to address this issue. This panel would function independently of race-day stewards, guaranteeing unbiased assessments free from the impact of current events. An impartial tribunal may have offered a more open review procedure in controversial circumstances, like the 2021 Abu Dhabi Grand Prix.

Although CAS is still a respected dispute resolution instrument, smaller teams are frequently deterred from submitting appeals by its high fees and complexity. A fast-track procedure or subsidised arbitration could level the playing field and increase access to justice for all parties involved. Furthermore, giving thorough explanations for decisions, including the supporting data and reasoning would increase confidence in the appeals process. By taking these actions, accusations of bias would be reduced and a more effective governance model which is less likely open to suspicion would be instilled.

Another crucial advancement is the formalisation of teams' and drivers' rights to attend hearings. More equal results and fewer misconceptions regarding on-track occurrences would result from making sure their opinions are acknowledged during the decision-making process. Additionally, requiring race directors and teams to record their conversations would produce an open record for appeals. When combined, these actions would give stakeholders the ability to more successfully contest apparent injustices and increase trust in the impartiality of FIA rulings. For example, after the controversial 2021 Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, the FIA introduced procedural changes, including a Virtual Race Control Room and restrictions on direct team-to-race control communications. These measures were aimed to increase transparency and trust in FIA rulings.

Proposing independent panels or rotating stewards to reduce partiality

Effective strategies to reduce possible bias in FIA governance include the introduction of rotating stewards and the establishment of independent panels for important decisions. Controversial decisions would be rendered impartially by independent panels made up of professionals such as former drivers, sports solicitors and engineers unrelated to Formula 1 stakeholders. By removing operational effects, decisions should be seen as impartial and unaffected by outside forces, allaying worries about partiality in well-known cases.

By avoiding affinity between decision-makers and teams or drivers, a rotating steward system further improves impartiality. Nowadays, even when unintended, repeated encounters with the same people might result in unconscious

biases. This risk would be decreased by rotating stewards from a wide pool of competent applicants, including people from different motorsport disciplines and geographical areas. Other sports, like international cricket and football, have effectively used this strategy to keep officials impartial.

Lewis Hamilton and the Royal Academy of Engineering formed the Hamilton Commission, which has brought attention to the ways in which unconscious biases can influence motorsport decision-making. Their 2021 report emphasised the need for a more inclusive and rotating steward system by highlighting the lack of diversity among officials and the possibility of affinity bias (Morgan and Scarlett 2021).

The FIA should make the selection criteria for independent panels and rotating stewards publicly available to increase openness. Independence, moral principles, and pertinent experience should be prioritised in the criteria. Stakeholder trust in the objectivity of decision-makers would increase with such transparency. By implementing these tactics, the FIA may allay long-standing worries about bias and guarantee more impartial and consistent governance that gains the respect of drivers, teams, and fans.

A rotating steward system has the potential to improve impartiality, but it also has drawbacks. Because various stewards may have different interpretations of the regulations, frequent rotation may result in inconsistent decision-making. The fairness of decisions may also be impacted by new stewards' unfamiliarity with past occurrences or driver behaviour. Additionally, as accountability for contentious decisions is distributed more widely, the system may lessen accountability. Furthermore, the rotating stewards' capacity to make wise decisions under duress may be jeopardised if they lack the necessary training or expertise. Maintaining fairness and trust in FIA governance requires addressing these issues with appropriate training, unambiguous instructions, and a systematic rotation procedure.

Comparative Analysis with Other Sports Governing Bodies

Overview of other international sports bodies

An understanding of the institutional and governance issues that organisations in charge of international sports face can be gained by contrasting the FIA with other international sports governing bodies, such as FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) and the IOC (International Olympic Committee).

One of the most well-known sporting organisations in the world is perhaps FIFA, which oversees international football. Its responsibilities include establishing the sport globally, enforcing regulations, and planning important competitions like the FIFA World Cup. FIFA has faced many criticisms over its decision-making procedures, especially with relation to the choice of host countries for events, notwithstanding its accomplishments. For example, accusations of corruption and partiality were raised when Qatar was chosen to host the 2022 World Cup (Hearty 2023). These problems reflect doubts about the FIA's objectivity, especially when crucial choices seem to favour particular groups or interested parties. FIFA has implemented reforms, including an independent oversight committee and more open tournament bidding procedures, to address governance concerns.

In a similar vein, the IOC is responsible for managing the Olympic Games and advancing the ideals of excellence, inclusivity, and fairness. Like the FIA, the IOC must strike a balance between the conflicting interests of sponsors, national Olympic organisations, and athletes and its regulatory responsibility. The organisation has come under fire for alleged irregularities in how it has handled doping claims and made judgements on the suspension or reinstatement of individuals or teams. For instance, they have come under fire for seeming inconsistent or politically swayed in its reactions to state-sponsored doping incidents, such as those involving Russian athletes. These governance conundrums are like the FIA's difficulties in handling outside demands and enforcing regulations fairly. By implementing the World Anti-Doping Agency's guidelines and strengthening its disciplinary processes, the IOC has tried to allay these concerns.

The IOC and FIFA both serve as examples of the difficulties in upholding accountability while preserving autonomy. Like the FIA, they are private and self-regulating organisations that function without interference from the government. This independence has, nevertheless, occasionally given rise to charges of opacity and inadequate accountability, with political influence playing a role at both the international and national level. Both organisations have responded by stepping up external inspection, working with international legal agencies to solve governance and corruption issues, and establishing independent ethics commissions.

It is clear from comparing the governance structures of FIFA and the IOC that the FIA is not the only organisation dealing with problems of bias, accountability, and openness. The significance of implementing best practices from other sports organisations like impartial supervision systems, standardised procedures, and increased stakeholder involvement is underscored by these parallels. Even if each sport has its own unique set of rules, the fundamental ideas of justice and equity are universal and can be used to improve Formula 1 governance.

Best practices in neutral governance

Any respectable international sports organisation must have neutral governance. Based on FIFA's, the IOC's, and other organisations' experiences, a few practices have been developed to improve decision-making's impartiality, accountability, and fairness.

As demonstrated by FIFA and the IOC, one important approach is the creation of independent ethics and compliance committees. For instance, FIFA's Ethics Committee functions separately from its Executive Committee, guaranteeing that internal political influence does not affect judgements on corruption or rule infractions. In reality, though, these

committees have frequently come under fire for either being swayed by the very organisations they are supposed to be monitoring or for having no actual enforcement authority. To enhance oversight, the FIA might also profit from dividing its disciplinary and regulatory responsibilities, but merely establishing such bodies is not always sufficient to ensure true neutrality.

Another crucial procedure is to make the decision-makers' selection procedures transparent. By using impartial arbiters and transparent, open criteria, the IOC guarantees fairness in athlete eligibility disputes. Establishing transparent and open standards for selecting FIA officials and stewards would boost trust in the organisation's leadership.

Systemic bias is also lessened when governance systems are inclusive and diverse. Initiatives from the IOC, like regional representation requirements and gender equality programmes, foster a more equitable setting for decision-making. Similar steps might be taken by the FIA to ensure that its panels and regulatory bodies represent the variety of Formula 1's global audience.

The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) is an example of uniform rule enforcement, which guarantees uniformity for all competitors and lessens the impression of partiality. Applying sanctions and rules consistently to all teams and drivers would increase the FIA's credibility.

Another good tactic is to interact with external stakeholders. To match policy with stakeholder interests, the IOC frequently confers with athletes, national committees, and independent organisations. Giving teams, drivers, and fans official avenues to voice their opinions could improve the transparency and inclusivity of FIA governance.

In accordance with the highest principles of impartiality and honesty, the FIA may reduce perceptions of prejudice and position itself as a pioneer in equitable and open sports administration by using these best practices.

Cross-applicability of sports law standards

Governance issues in Formula 1, such as bias in FIA decision-making, can often be addressed by adapting sports law principles from other fields. These guidelines provide frameworks for guaranteeing responsibility, openness, and equity, and have been demonstrated in other international sports organisations.

Independent adjudicatory bodies are a crucial transportable standard. The Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) and FIFA's Disciplinary Committee are prime examples of fair dispute settlement. Extending CAS's jurisdiction or establishing its own independent panel to monitor controversial rulings could be advantageous for Formula 1.

Another essential principle is the uniform enforcement of rules. Fairness is ensured in sports like rugby and cricket by applying specific regulations uniformly to all players. By reducing prejudice and human error, technology like cricket's Decision Review System (DRS) (Vijaykumar 2024) offers Formula 1 a blueprint for implementing real-time decision reviews for consistency and transparency.

In governance, transparency is essential. Major decisions, financial accounts, and regulation changes are made public by organisations such as FIFA and the IOC. The FIA may promote trust and lessen accusations of favouritism by being transparent in steward appointments and offering thorough justifications for its decisions.

Equally crucial is the representation of stakeholders. By creating advisory councils for drivers and teams, Formula 1 might adopt the IOC's Athlete's Commission's practice of giving competitors a say in governance. By ensuring that decisions represent the opinions of individuals who will be directly affected, such inclusion helps to lessen perceptions of prejudice.

Last but not least, FIFA and the IOC uphold fairness using equal treatment standards and frequent governance audits. To maintain Formula 1's credibility, the FIA could implement independent reviews and zero-tolerance anti-discrimination measures, which guarantee impartiality.

Through the incorporation of these universal principles of accountability, openness, and justice, the FIA can improve its structure, address governance issues, and protect Formula 1's integrity.

Conclusion

The findings of the study suggest that although the FIA has worked to improve its administration in response to criticism, there are still major obstacles in the way of guaranteeing impartiality and justice. Past scandals like Spygate, Crashgate, and the Abu Dhabi 2021 Grand Prix highlight enduring problems with apparent partiality and inconsistency in the FIA's decision-making procedures. In addition to harming the FIA's reputation, these cases have shown how susceptible its governance structure is to outside influences and internal conflicts of interest.

The FIA can benefit from international best practices, such as independent adjudicatory bodies and open governance structures, as shown by a comparative study with organisations like FIFA and the IOC. Adopting these procedures and increasing stakeholder participation may help to improve accountability and lessen perceptions of bias. This study also emphasises how sports law must change to meet the governance issues that organisations like the FIA face, with an emphasis on striking a balance between regulatory independence and accountability.

Moving forwards, the FIA must institutionalise reforms that put neutrality and transparency first. In addition to regaining the trust of stakeholders, this will establish a norm for governance in international motorsport. The FIA's success in preserving the integrity and spirit of competition of Formula 1 will ultimately depend on its capacity to adjust and carry out significant change. This is not merely a call to action. It is a demand for excellence. A moment to etch integrity into the very fabric of motorsport, ensuring Formula 1 remains a beacon of competitive spirit and unyielding justice.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Murugan, AA and Panchalingam, L. 2025. The Final Lap of Justice: Reforming FIA Governance in Formula 1. *Entertainment and Sports Law Journal*, 23(1): 5, pp. 1–13. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/eslj.1784>

Submitted: 09 January 2025

Accepted: 26 June 2025

Published: 20 August 2025

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