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ConIFA World Football Cup: In Conversation with Kabylia Manager Lyes Immemai

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The Kabylia team had a long journey to get to the ConIFA World Football Cup, a full squad list was not published at the beginning of the tournament for security reasons. Now with the tournament, coming to close we sat down with Lyes Immemai, the manager to discuss how it has gone.





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The Kabylia team got a real baptism of fire with an 8-0 defeat to Panjab in the opening match, a battling 0-0 draw with United Koreans in Japan meant they were not mathematically eliminated before their [final Group D with Western Armenia](#), however, they were in need of a 14 goal swing due to their poor goal difference. Despite having good moments, the opposition stormed to a four-goal win. The game was noted for passionate and unwavering support from the Kabylia fans.

Kabylia Fans Singing First Half



Immemai insists this means a lot to the players and is appreciated: "The answer of any trainer is that it's always nice and better to have a population beside us and to help and support and everything. So, I think that the players were very happy, it's something we talked about and I think it gives us warmth in our hearts."

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Kabylia is a region of North Africa, currently controlled by Algeria. Immemai insists, however: "We are not Algerian."

The Kabyles are an ethnically Berber people and were separate from the rest of Algeria as recently as 1847 when the French Empire gained control of the region.

Since Algerian independence, there has been a split between Kabylia and the rest of Algeria. Until 2002, the Berber language, Tamazight was not recognised. There have also been complaints of a lack of political, religious and cultural freedom from a very centralised government in Algiers, who didn't allow multi-party elections until the late 1980s. When it became clear the ruling party was heading for a crushing defeat, the military, who some observers say hold the real political power in the region, annulled the results. This led to a brutal seven-year civil war.

Increasing opposition led to the 2001 formation of the Movement for Autonomy in Kabylia (MAK) and since 2011, they have campaigned for independence.

Kabylia players have been under scrutiny from the government, FA President Akse Bellabacci was arrested and detained for 15 hours and several players reported their families



had been threatened and forced to sign sworn statements they were not and never will be members of MAK.

"I was arrested, they were blackmailing the players and their families, we have many players who didn't come because of those threats. The Algerian government still tries to block us and keep everything inside," explains Immemai.

"They are scared of Kabylia independence," he says before insisting: "We are not scared, we are not afraid of them."

Immemai had hoped the tournament would also give exposure to the Kabylia team and people to highlight this issue: "The target is the same for every country," he says before smiling and adding "to win the competition. We also wanted to show the world that we are a different nation, we are colonised by Algeria, so I think the message is already out."

Since their group stage elimination, Kabylia have beaten Matabeland on penalties and crushed Tibet 8-1 to secure a place in the ninth place-playoff with Abkhazia.

Immemai remains hopeful though admits beating the pre-tournament favourites will be tough: "We have many players injured and Abkhazia were the winners last time, I think we have less of a chance to win the game but it is football, so anything is possible."

After the tournament is completed, Immemai is not sure what the future holds: "The Kabylia team is not mine, it is for Kabylia, so it's not for me to decide", he insists but notes "I left everything to come here", so he is keen to continue to be involved in this type of project.

Quite simply the Kabylia team would not exist without ConIFA: "With whom you will play? for what reason you will contact the players?"

As for the organisation itself and the tournament itself, Immemai has nothing but positive words to say, having thoroughly enjoyed the tournament: "Sure, 100%, very nice people, very nice countries, very nice atmosphere."

He believes ConIFA is full of "very nice people, very professional people, they are just perfect. People are saying we are improving everything, we are doing it better and better but they are already doing good things and they are amazing."

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