



Governance Issues in Indonesian Professional Football Competitions: A Case Study of Liga 2 Indonesia

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Football Competition; Professional, Regulation; Liga 2

Article History

Received 31 November 2025

Revised 24 December 2025

Accepted 26 December 2025

Available Online 6 January 2026

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to examine various cases and issues that have occurred within Liga 2. Based on the investigation conducted, problems were identified both prior to the commencement of the competition and during its implementation. Weak regulatory frameworks, frequent regulatory changes during the course of the competition, and non-compliance by stakeholders—including actors within the Football Association of Indonesia (PSSI) itself—constitute fundamental and serious concerns. Liga 2, which involves multiple stakeholders, significant financial circulation, and the potential to produce high-quality professional clubs, talented players, and competent match officials, has been undermined by these recurring issues. In the short term, necessary solutions include improving the competition system and regulatory framework to be implemented in Liga 2. The regulations must align with the statutes of Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and be supported by clear and firm legal enforcement against any violations. In this regard, practitioners involved in the competition possess the authority to implement such measures. For long-term solutions, several evaluation instruments may be adopted, including: (a) management, (b) broadcasting and sponsorship (commercial aspects), (c) the application of sports science, (d) political and policy dimensions, and (e) systems for analyzing athlete performance (Rattanapian et al., 2017: 1). These evaluation components provide opportunities for academic stakeholders to contribute through systematic evaluative research.

INTRODUCTION

In an effort to improve the quality of Indonesian football, one key strategy has been the organization of professional competitions involving professional clubs. To ensure the smooth implementation and success of these competitions, Football Association of Indonesia (PSSI), as the highest football governing body in Indonesia, appointed PT Liga Indonesia Baru (PT LIB) as the official operator of national football competitions. In this capacity, PT LIB manages the two tiers of professional football competitions in Indonesia, namely Liga 1 and Liga 2. On 15 April 2017, PSSI officially launched Liga 1 (previously known as ISL), the highest level of football competition in Indonesia, alongside Liga 2 as the second-tier competition.

Since its inauguration on 19 April 2017, several controversies and irregularities have characterized both the preparation and implementation of Liga 2. In previous seasons, Liga 2—formerly known as the Premier Division—was contested by 24 professional clubs. However, in this edition, the number of participants expanded significantly to 60 clubs. It may therefore be argued that Liga 2 is one of the professional football competitions with the largest number of participants globally. As reported by *offside.co.id* through its coordinator Akmal Marhali, the Save Our Soccer (#SOS) raised concerns regarding PSSI's decision to proceed with a 60-club format. Their findings suggested that many participating clubs did not meet the eligibility criteria based on professional club licensing regulations established by Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and Asian Football Confederation (AFC). Ideally, professional football clubs worldwide should be structured legally and governed in a manner that prioritizes sporting objectives over financial considerations (Union of European Football Associations [UEFA] in Ward et al., 2012: 3). Football clubs are organizations that, while seemingly straightforward, exist to facilitate participation and provide organized football as a form of spectacle (Morrow & Hamil, in Ward et al., 2012: 3). In the case of Liga 2, it is evident that several clubs appeared to be compelled to participate in the competition.

Another notable irregularity lies in the stark disparity in financial subsidies between Liga 1 and Liga 2 participants. According to *offside.co.id*, Liga 1 clubs received financial subsidies amounting to IDR 7.5 billion per club and were granted the opportunity to register Marquee Players. In contrast, Liga 2 clubs—despite competing in a professional league—did not hold shares in PT Liga Indonesia Baru (PT LIB) as the competition operator. Consequently, Liga 2 participants received subsidies of no more than IDR 500 million per club to sustain what is considered a highly demanding competition. This disparity renders Liga 2 particularly vulnerable to various operational and structural challenges.

The first controversy emerged during the group allocation process. Of the 60 participating clubs, Persatuan Sepakbola Seluruh Indonesia (PSSI) divided the competition into six groups, meaning that each group consisted of 10 teams. The grouping was based on regional proximity. However, the significant disparity in the number of clubs across provinces resulted in an uneven distribution of participants. This imbalance became a source of vulnerability that triggered various subsequent issues. Further controversy arose when PSSI implemented an unusual promotion and relegation system. Out of the 60 participating clubs, only three were planned to be promoted to Liga 1. More critically, a substantial number—36 clubs—were set to be relegated to Liga 3. This policy was adopted as part of PSSI's plan to reduce the number of Liga 2 participants to 24 clubs for the 2018 season.

Among the various irregularities and controversies, one particularly alarming issue was the practice of buying and selling club licenses. At least five clubs in Liga 2 were involved in such transactions. These included PS Bintang Jaya Asahan, which relocated and rebranded as 757 Kepri Jaya FC; Villa 2000, which became Celebest FC; Persebo Bondowoso, which transformed into Sumsel Musi Banyuasin FC; Persires Rengat, which changed into Lampung Sakti FC; and Laga FC, which underwent a change of ownership and became Sragen United.

According to the statutes and regulations of Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) concerning professional club licensing, it is important for PSSI to recognize that club transfers are only permissible through the transfer of shares, not through the sale of licenses. If what occurs is the sale of licenses, then PSSI is effectively in violation of FIFA regulations as the highest governing body of world football. However, this issue appeared to escape PSSI's attention. More concerningly, Save Our Soccer (#SOS) revealed that the practice of license trading allegedly involved senior PSSI officials acting as intermediaries. The situation and conditions of Indonesian football, particularly in relation to the management of the Liga 2 professional competition, have prompted the author to examine this issue further in this article.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Non-Ideal Position of Regulatory Frameworks in Indonesia

We The organizational structure and governance of football worldwide are arranged hierarchically, forming a pyramid system in which national football associations within a continent are affiliated with a continental governing body known as a confederation—for example, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) for countries in Asia. These continental confederations are, in turn, unified under the global governing body of football, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). This hierarchical integration ensures that football development systems—from elite levels to grassroots initiatives—as well as regulations governing the laws of the game and league organization, are centralized within a unified operational framework (Holt, 2007: 54). Accordingly, Football Association of Indonesia (PSSI), as the highest authority in national football, establishes regulatory frameworks for organizing competitions that must adhere to FIFA statutes, which are binding upon all stakeholders involved.

In general, regulatory frameworks can be understood through the concept of “regulatory space” proposed by Hancher and Moran. This concept conceptualizes regulation as a division between public authority and private interests, while also referring to the environment inhabited by various social actors (Hancher and Moran in Walters & Hamil, 2013: 741). To understand the nature of regulatory space, it is necessary to consider the relationships and interactions among key actors in the regulatory process, the resources they utilize, and the distribution of these resources across different institutions. These relationships play a crucial role in shaping regulatory processes, highlighting the importance of political dynamics involving contests over power, authority, and legitimacy among stakeholders such as commercial organizations, regulatory bodies, and governments (Walters & Hamil, 2013: 741).

The primary objective and benefit of establishing regulations is to ensure that the values of sportsmanship—particularly in football—are maintained. A clear example can be seen in cases where players suffer severe injuries due to violent incidents during matches. In August 2008, Ben Collett, a young player from Manchester United, was awarded compensation amounting to £4.3 million by the High Court in his case against Middlesbrough FC and one of its players after sustaining a double leg fracture that ultimately forced him to retire from professional football (Chadwick & Hamil, 2010: 74). For the sport, this award represents one of the highest compensations granted, reflecting the significant earning potential of professional players at the elite level, as well as the future prospects of young athletes. In several European countries, legal frameworks and regulations in football also play a crucial role in governing the behavior of supporters of clubs participating in competitions (Chadwick & Hamil, 2010: 76). In Indonesia, a notable regulatory implementation occurred when Football Association of Indonesia (PSSI) prohibited clubs from using state budget funds (APBN).

According to Hilman (2016: 75), “Football Association of Indonesia (PSSI) issued a regulation prohibiting football clubs from using regional government budget funds (APBD) for their operational activities. This policy was introduced because the substantial financial requirements of football clubs, if funded through such sources, could potentially disrupt regional fiscal stability. Moreover, the use of these funds is highly vulnerable to misuse, particularly due to the risk of corruption-related offenses.”

In the contemporary football industry—particularly in highly developed contexts such as Europe—regulatory frameworks tend to focus on clubs’ financial capacity as a prerequisite for obtaining licenses to compete at both national and confederation levels. In 2010, the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), as the highest governing authority of football in Europe responsible for overseeing football-related activities and financial sustainability,

introduced a regulation known as Financial Fair Play (FFP). This policy was established in response to growing concerns regarding the financial stability of European football (Jemson, 2013: 3).

Jemson further explains that the regulation was designed to achieve a range of broader objectives: to enhance the economic and financial capacity of clubs; to improve transparency and credibility; to prioritize the protection of creditors; and to ensure that clubs fulfill their financial obligations to players, social/tax authorities, and other clubs in a timely manner. Additionally, the regulation aims to introduce greater discipline and rationality in club financial management, encourage clubs to operate within their own generated revenues, promote responsible spending for the long-term benefit of football, and safeguard the long-term viability and sustainability of European football clubs.

Liga 2: Competition Management Considered “Unprofessional”

In the process of developing and fostering football, it is essential to organize competitions ranging from youth development levels to fully professional tiers. According to Sulistiyono (2012: 124), “competition in football is a situation in which multiple individuals or teams strive to achieve a common objective, thereby motivating them to outperform others by enhancing their performance, سواء at the individual or team level.” Sulistiyono further argues that since the establishment of Football Association of Indonesia (PSSI), an appropriate and effective competition model aligned with Indonesia’s potential has yet to be identified. To date, PSSI has implemented three types of competitions aimed at developing national football potential: competitions for professional, semi-professional, and amateur clubs.

Football competitions play a crucial role in shaping the performance of the Indonesian National Team on the international stage, as they provide the primary platform for emerging professional talent. At the Asian level, the success of Japan’s professional football competition, the J-League, demonstrates how a well-structured league can significantly enhance national team performance. The J-League can be regarded as a foundational factor in Japan’s qualification for the last four FIFA World Cup tournaments, including progression to the knockout stages in two of them, as well as winning the AFC Cup (Asian Cup) four times (Dolles & Söderman, 2013: 703). This achievement reflects a remarkable period of football development in Japan.

At the professional level, competitions require equally professional management, with increased complexity due to the involvement of professional clubs, contractual agreements with players and coaches, extended competition schedules, financial circulation reaching trillions of rupiah, as well as broadcasting and commercial sponsorship activities. However, in 2012, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) stated on its official website (www.afc.com) that football competitions and clubs in Indonesia had not yet reached professional standards. Based on this assessment, Indonesian clubs were deemed ineligible to send representatives to compete in the AFC Champions League (Sulistiyono, 2012: 125).

Professional competitions that involve multiple stakeholders and substantial financial circulation require clear and binding regulations to ensure that they operate smoothly and in accordance with established rules. According to Kristiyanto (2016: 447), “professional football competitions are governed by a set of universal rules derived from the FIFA legal system, which consists of the FIFA Statutes and their derivative regulations. This framework is known as *lex sportiva*, encompassing both the Laws of the Game and the broader *lex sportiva* system itself, which is enforced to ensure that professional football competitions in each country operate according to proper mechanisms.”

Despite the fact that Indonesian football competitions remain relatively credible and maintain a high level of competitiveness among clubs, numerous off-field scandals continue to emerge (Dorsey & Sebastian, 2013: 616). Football players who choose to compete in

Indonesia's professional leagues have the opportunity to earn attractive salaries, and an increasing number of foreign players with higher levels of quality have been drawn to play in the country (Dorsey & Sebastian, 2013: 616). However, salary-related issues frequently arise, particularly toward the end of the competition. In practice, there are still clubs that fail to fulfill their financial obligations by delaying or defaulting on player wages. Therefore, Football Association of Indonesia (PSSI), as the highest authority in Indonesian football, must ensure that its competition regulations are aligned with and do not violate the rules established by Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) as the supreme governing body of world football.

Before being named Liga 2, the competition was previously known as the *Divisi Utama*. Liga 2 refers to Indonesia's professional football competition in 2017, positioned below Liga 1 (Liga 2 Regulation, 2017: Article 2). To ensure that the competition operates smoothly and in accordance with the statutes of Football Association of Indonesia (PSSI) and Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), PSSI appointed PT Liga Indonesia Baru (PT LIB), a company established under the laws of the Republic of Indonesia and officially recognized by the Ministry of Law and Human Rights, as the competition operator (Liga 2 Regulation, 2017: Article 3). In addition, PT LIB holds several key responsibilities, including:

- 1) Supervising preparations for Liga 2;
- 2) Implementing decisions of the PSSI Executive Committee regarding the format and participants of Liga 2
- 3) Determining the Liga 2 match schedule;
- 4) Conducting administrative and factual verification of participating clubs during both the preparation and competition phases;
- 5) Approving stadiums to be used in Liga 2;
- 6) Providing recommendations on disciplinary violations to the Disciplinary Committee; and
- 7) Determining match status in cases of postponement, cancellation, or force majeure (Liga 2 Regulation, 2017: Article 3).

Liga 2 participants were determined by PSSI by considering sporting merit from the 2014 Indonesian Premier Division competition, decisions from the 2017 PSSI Annual Congress, and resolutions of the PSSI Executive Committee. As stated in the Liga 2 regulations, the number of participating clubs was initially set at 61; however, prior to the commencement of the competition, Persija Wamena withdrew, reducing the total to 60 clubs.

The competition format of Liga 2 consisted of four stages: (a) the preliminary round (group stage), (b) the round of 16 and play-off stage, (c) the quarter-finals, and (d) the knockout stage, comprising the semi-finals and final (Liga 2 Regulation, 2017: Article 15). As previously discussed, of the 60 participating teams, 36 clubs were relegated to Liga 3 (Liga Nusantara), while the teams finishing in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place were promoted to Liga 1 for the 2018 season.

Participating Clubs with Various Issues

Every professional football competition is expected to involve professional football clubs. In this context, "professional" implies that the clubs have fully met the requirements necessary to participate in the competition. As discussed in the introduction, many Liga 2 participating clubs did not, in fact, meet the regulatory requirements to compete. This is particularly notable given that Football Association of Indonesia (PSSI) itself established the regulations governing club eligibility. According to the Liga 2 Regulations (2017: Article 2), "a club is defined as a football club that has fulfilled the requirements set by PT Liga Indonesia Baru (PT LIB) for participation in Liga 2 organized by LIB." The requirements for

participation are further outlined in Article 4 concerning Admission Criteria and Procedures, and Article 5 concerning Integrity. In terms of eligibility, there are seven criteria that prospective Liga 2 clubs must fulfill. According to the Liga 2 Regulations (2017: Article 4), these include:

- 1) Possessing the qualification to participate in Liga 2;
- 2) Completing and submitting all documents and forms required by LIB related to legal, administrative, and financial aspects within the specified deadlines;
- 3) Completing the formal registration document, namely the *Participating Team Agreement*, and returning it to LIB no later than 17 April 2017 via email and registered mail. LIB will only recognize submissions that comply with the prescribed return procedures as valid;
- 4) Ensuring that the original copy of the *Participating Team Agreement* is received by LIB before the stipulated deadline; failure to do so will result in the cancellation of the club's participation status;
- 5) Ensuring that all personnel registered as officials for each match understand and comply with the provisions set out in the *Participating Team Agreement*;
- 6) Complying with regulations aimed at ensuring the integrity of Liga 2 as stipulated in Article 5;
- 7) Providing written confirmation that the club, along with its players and officials, will adhere to the *Laws of the Game* and agree to respect the principles of fair play, as well as the regulations, directives, and decisions of LIB.

In addition to these eligibility criteria, PSSI also established integrity regulations aimed at maintaining and safeguarding the integrity of Liga 2. Accordingly, participating clubs are required to comply with four key provisions as outlined in the Liga 2 Regulations (2017: Article 5):

- 1) Holding membership in another club participating in Liga 2;
- 2) Being involved in the management, administration, and/or sporting performance of another participating club;
- 3) Acting as a majority shareholder or controlling the majority of voting rights in another club; or
- 4) Exercising influence in any manner that could determine decision-making within another club.

With the existence of integrity regulations, participating clubs are required to engage in club development programs as a form of protection to maintain competitive balance among Liga 2 clubs. Furthermore, any activities and parties associated with betting and match-fixing are subject to sanctions in accordance with the Disciplinary Code and Code of Ethics. However, despite the formulation of comprehensive regulations, the reality on the ground indicates that these rules are not implemented as intended. Many clubs fail to meet the stipulated requirements and are eventually disqualified or withdraw while the competition is ongoing.

The issue of clubs being unable to meet the eligibility criteria for participation is, in fact, a longstanding problem. This condition largely stems from the relatively weak management of football clubs in Indonesia, despite the fact that sound management practices constitute a fundamental requirement for professional clubs. Effective management can mitigate issues such as financial opacity and early exploitation, while also contributing to the development of Indonesia's tourism sector (Chadwick & Hamil in Andrew & Suryawan, 2015: 176). One of the defining characteristics of professional football management is the establishment of a sports industry ecosystem. Accordingly, several key factors must be considered by clubs to ensure sustainability within this industry. According to Masteralexis et al., as cited in Andrew and

Suryawan (2015: 177), these include facility management, event packaging, sports marketing and sales, sponsorship, communication and broadcasting, as well as sports media.

Furthermore, Andrew and Suryawan (2015: 180–181) state that “every professional football club must possess a representative stadium, demonstrate an understanding of banking, accounting, and taxation regulations in Indonesia to properly implement *Financial Fair Play*, and provide minimum facilities and infrastructure to support player development. In addition, clubs should secure sponsorship support from both public and private sectors in accordance with their needs, register players for *BPJS* and/or insurance schemes based on their income, and utilize digital media—particularly by establishing official websites in both Indonesian and international languages.”

Admittedly, achieving these standards remains far from the current reality for many professional football clubs in Indonesia. Nevertheless, the existence of such benchmarks at least signals the need for clubs to undertake significant improvements.

Another persistent issue frequently encountered by professional clubs in Indonesia is the delay or non-payment of player salaries. At the end of each season, cases consistently emerge in which clubs fail to settle their financial obligations to players. One of the most notable cases involved Diego Mendieta, a foreign player whose salary remained unpaid by his club. He subsequently suffered a serious illness, was unable to return to his home country, and eventually passed away (Firdandhi et al., 2014). In addition to delayed or unpaid salaries, other issues include the improper selection of dispute resolution mechanisms in conflicts between clubs and players, as well as the failure to cover medical expenses for injured players (Firdandhi et al., 2014). What, then, underlies the frequent occurrence of salary arrears? According to Firdandhi et al. (2014), “there is no Indonesian statutory regulation that specifically governs employment agreements for professional players.” Moreover, Football Association of Indonesia (PSSI) has often remained passive in cases where clubs have failed to fulfill their salary obligations to players.

CONCLUSION REMARKS AND FUTURE RECOMENDATION

Volunteers Sport, by its very nature, implies significant differences when compared to competition among firms in other markets, both in terms of its own regulatory framework and its structural characteristics. Certain rules—such as separate competitions for men and women, the Laws of the Game, the need for outcome uncertainty, and limitations on the number of participants—are inherent in sport and essential for its organization. Consequently, these features may, to a certain extent, be exempt from the application of general treaty provisions (including those within legal and regulatory frameworks) (Izquierdo, 2014: 353).

Professional football competitions hold substantial significance for Indonesia, particularly in their role in advancing national football development, with the ultimate objective of improving the performance of the national team at the international level. However, since the inception of such competitions, serious issues have consistently emerged. One of the primary causes of these persistent problems is the detrimental impact of political and commercial manipulation. In addition, Indonesian football has struggled to free itself from the influence of external manipulative forces, particularly those associated with corrupt political practices (Dorsey & Sebastian, 2013: 629).

The case study examined in this article demonstrates that numerous problems have occurred within the Liga 2 competition, beginning even before the competition commenced and continuing until its final stages. One of the most fundamental yet critical issues faced by Liga 2 is the weakness of its regulatory framework, which is frequently altered during the course of the competition. Moreover, stakeholders who are expected to comply with these regulations often violate them—including actors within Football Association of Indonesia (PSSI) itself. As a result, a competition that involves multiple stakeholders, significant

financial circulation, and the potential to produce high-quality professional clubs, talented players, and competent match officials becomes undermined, as recurring issues persist from season to season. Behind the inadequate management of professional football competitions in Indonesia, there appears to be a lack of comprehensive evaluation whose results are transparently communicated to the public. Without such evaluation and dissemination, efforts to achieve collective and systematic improvements across all aspects of the football ecosystem remain limited.

Almost every season, the issues faced by the Liga 2 competition remain largely unchanged. At the time of writing, Liga 2 had reached the quarter-final stage (final eight) and was projected to conclude before the end of 2017. One of the primary objectives of this article is to express the expectation that, in the 2018 Liga 2 season, such recurring problems will no longer hinder the smooth operation and overall success of the competition. Therefore, the author proposes the implementation of a comprehensive evaluation as a necessary step forward.

From a management perspective, solutions may be formulated in both the short term and the long term. In this regard, the stakeholders with the greatest potential to drive improvements are practitioners and academics who are concerned with the advancement of Indonesian football. In the short term, immediate improvements should focus on refining the competition system and regulatory framework to be applied in Liga 2. These regulations must align with the statutes of Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and be accompanied by clear and firm enforcement mechanisms against any violations. In this context, practitioners involved in the competition hold the authority to implement such measures.

Based on the author's review of the literature on improving the quality of professional football competitions, an international study was identified that proposes an evaluation framework to assess how effectively a competition operates. Several key dimensions within this framework may serve as long-term solutions: (a) management, (b) broadcasting and sponsorship (commercial aspects), (c) the application of sports science, (d) political and policy dimensions, and (e) systems for analyzing athlete performance (Rattanapian et al., 2017: 1). These evaluation components provide opportunities for academic stakeholders to contribute through systematic evaluative research.

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