

COMMENTARY

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The Cairo Derby: Politics vs. Repression

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The premier league final between Cairo's two storied clubs, Al-Ahly SC and Al Zamalek SC, once the world's most violent derby, was more than a clash between two soccer giants. It was a clash between management styles and diametrically opposed approaches towards militant, highly politicized, street battle-hardened soccer fans. The clash highlighted the advantages of engagement as opposed to the risk of radicalization and escalating political violence.

On the pitch like on the streets and university campuses of Egypt, Zamalek's emergence as this year's Egyptian champion despite Ahli having won the derby itself would seem to legitimize the club's aggressive effort to criminalize its fan base.

The facts on the ground, however, suggest that Al-Ahly's engagement with its supporters has produced far better results, including greater cooperation with a group that like its Zamalek counterpart played a key role in the toppling in 2011 of President Hosni Mubarak and protests against all his successors in the past four years.

Members of Ultras Ahlawy, the Al-Ahly support group, and Ultras White Knights (UWK), the Zamalek fan group, form the core of prominent student and youth groups that have been targeted by the government of general-turned-president Abdel Fattah Al Sisi, who in 2013 toppled Egypt's only democratically elected president, Mohammed Morsi, in a military coup. More than a thousand protesters have been killed on El-Sisi's watch while tens of thousands have been incarcerated and thousands expelled from universities.

Zamalek president Mortada Mansour, a larger than life figure, whose at times comical outbursts often persuade the government to maintain a distance even though they support El-Sisi's

policies, charged that Al-Ahly's victory on the pitch was due to "ghosts and jinns" and that his assertions are "written in the holy Quran."

More seriously, Mortada has identified the UWK and other militant fans or ultras as enemies of the state aligned with the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. He succeeded earlier this year in persuading a court to ban ultras as terrorists on par with the Muslim Brothers. In February, Mortada took pride in taking responsibility for a confrontation at a Cairo stadium between security forces and fans in which at least 20 supporters were killed.

Mortada, whose hard line mirrors the government's tough approach towards its opponents, took his battle earlier to Al-Ahly after thousands of Ultras Ahlawy was allowed to attend a training of their team in preparation for the derby.

UWK, whom Mortada accuses of having tried to assassinate him, are barred from Zamalek events. The Ahli fans reportedly used the training to mock Mortada in chants and hurl abuse at him not only because he heads their arch rival but as a result of his hard-line anti-ultras, pro-government stance. They also demanded a lifting of the ban on spectators attending soccer matches that has been in place for much of the four years since the fall of Mubarak.

In response, Mortada accused Al-Ahly president Mahmoud Taher of allowing fans to "terrorize citizens" and of displaying a lack of respect for the ministries of defence and interior that controls the security forces. The interior ministry has been the main driver behind the ban. Mortada said he had filed charges against Al-Ahly president Mahmoud Taher for hosting a terrorist organization.

Taher refused to be drawn by Mortada, noting in a veiled criticism of the ban on spectators that the ultras had "set an example to follow in terms of discipline, given how they had entered and left the stadium despite their large numbers. Ahli, the leader of Arab and African sports with its titles and trophies, refuses to be drawn into such matters ... while stressing its respect for different opinions and views," Taher said.

While Mortada's hard line reflects government policy, Taher's approach proved its value in December when Ahlawy fans stormed a stadium hours before it was to host an African championship final in support of their demand that they be allowed to attend the match.

In an unprecedented move, Taher stopped security forces from violently evicting the fans and negotiated their peaceful departure in exchange for interior ministry agreement to allow them into the stadium during the match. The fans agreed as part of the deal to subject themselves to security checks and not to disrupt the match, a promise they kept.

For a brief moment, the incident held out hope that the government may be persuaded that engagement rather than brutal repression is more likely to reduce tension and prevent radicalization among frustrated and angry youth who lack social and economic prospects.

Ultimately, the government's willingness to work with Taher did not indicate a change of heart but a desire to ensure that the match from which Al Ahly emerged as the continent's champion went off without a hitch.

If Taher's soccer-focused approach has proven that engagement produces results, Mortada and the government's insistence on brutal confrontation risks further escalation in a country that is fighting an armed insurgency in the Sinai and is witnessing the sprouting of militant urban groups that target security and judicial authorities.

"We had high hopes. We staged the revolution in 2011. The new generation has nothing to lose. We recognize that football is political. That's why we are involved not only in football but also in politics. We oppose the brutality of this regime and its pawns. Neither Sisi nor Mortada are interested in politics. Their language is exclusively the language of repression," said an ultra who is also a student leader.

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