

COMMENTARY

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Militant Soccer Fans Claim Responsibility for Cairo Bombing

James M. Dorsey

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

A shadowy group of militant soccer fans that has largely lied low since it participated in mass anti-government protests in 2013 that led to the military overthrow of Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi has claimed responsibility for a car bomb near a Cairo security building that injured at least six policemen.

Whether the group, the Black Bloc, was responsible or not, it is the first time a soccer-related group claims responsibility for an act of political violence and reflects a trend towards radicalization among politicized football fans. The claim on Facebook also would be the first time that a supposedly anti-Islamist group has targeted an institution of the Egyptian state.

“We declare full and complete responsibility for the blasts, which occurred about an hour ago,” the Black Bloc said adding that it was a response to detention of large numbers of people who have either not been charged with an offence or are facing what the group called “non-criminal” charges.

The government of President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi, the general who shed his uniform after staging a coup against Morsi, Egypt’s first and only democratically elected president, has introduced draconic laws to suppress dissent and critical media reporting, killed more than 1,400 people since the July 2013 military takeover, and imprisoned tens of thousands.

Sisi has approved new counter-terrorism laws that establish special courts, offer additional protection from legal consequences for military and police officers who have used force, and ban the media from taking exception to government accounts of political violence.

Amnesty International, in a recently published report entitled ‘Generation Jail: Egypt's youth go from protest to prison,’ said “a generation of young Egyptian activists that came to the fore around the ousting of repressive ruler Hosni Mubarak in 2011 is today languishing behind bars.” It said that the “mass protests have given way to mass arrests, as 2011’s ‘Generation Protest’ has become 2015’s ‘Generation Jail.’”

The Black Bloc emerged in early 2013 as a group of masked black clad vigilantes founded primarily by battle-steeped soccer supporters with the aim of protecting protesters against violence by Morsi’s supporters. The group sided with police and security forces in the summer of 2013 in their brutal crackdown on Morsi’s Muslim Brotherhood.

If Black Bloc’s claim is accurate, it would constitute the first time soccer fans have resorted to bombings rather than clashes with security forces or the storming of stadia and buildings. Even if the claim proves to be a publicity stunt, it would suggest a split in the ranks of Egypt’s significant movement of militant, well-organized, highly politicized and street-battle hardened soccer fans.

Iyad al Baghdadi, a prominent Egyptian blogger, who was forced into exile in Norway first by Egypt and then by the United Arab Emirates, cast doubt on the Black Bloc claim. “Claim of responsibility by the #Egypt Black Bloc (anti-Islamist, anarchist?). FB post, so pretty unreliable,” Al Baghdadi said in a tweet.

Black Bloc works alongside Ultras Nahdawy which was formed by soccer fans with Islamist leanings who constitute the backbone of the anti-Al Sisi student movement and is also the only group of football activists that is not associated with a specific club.

The Black Bloc claim would suggest that anger at the Al Sisi regime’s brutal and draconic repression and failure to address frustration in Egypt’s youth bulge at a lack of economic and social prospects has gone beyond the Islamist insurgency in the Sinai and less militant Islamist opposition to the government to incorporate more secular groups that once supported the military and the security forces.

It also potentially signals that radicalization that no longer is limited to Islamists. The last year has shown primarily a fringe of Islamist-leaning soccer fans crossing the line from non-violent to violent protest.

People who were at the birth of the ultras in Egypt in 2007 as they grew to be one of the country’s largest social movements and with the exception of Bedouins and Islamists in the Sinai, the only group that consistently confronted the Mubarak regime’s security forces in clashes in stadia and current soccer fan activists have been warning that frustration among

Egyptian youth is boiling and could turn violent. The ultras played a key role in the 2011 protests that toppled Mr. Mubarak and most anti-government protests since.

“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 (Mansour) Mortada, (president of storied Cairo club Al Zamalek DC) are interested in politics. Their language is exclusively the language of repression,” said an ultra who is also a student leader.

“This is a new generation. It’s a generation that can’t be controlled. They don’t read. They believe in action and experience. They have balls. When the opportunity arises they will do something bigger than we ever did,” noted a founder of one of Egypt’s foremost militant fan groups or ultras.

Added another original ultra: “Things will eventually burst. When and where nobody knows. But the writing is on the wall.”

Concern that soccer stadia like in the waning years of Mubarak would again become venues of protest persuaded Sisi to keep stadia closed to the public during matches. An effort to ban the ultras as terrorist organizations is making its way through the courts.

Sisi’s one attempt to reopen stadia in February was immediately shelved after 20 fans were killed by security forces at a stadium in Cairo during the first match for which a limited number of tickets were made available.

Note: This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web link: <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2015/08/militant-soccer-fans-claim.html>

James M. Dorsey is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, co-director of the Institute of Fan Culture of the University of Würzburg, and the author of the blog, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer. Email: jmdorsey@questfze.com

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