

# COMMENTARY

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## **Egypt Throws the Dice with Partial Lifting of Stadia Ban**

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**T**he Egyptian interior ministry, in a potential signal that the country's military-backed regime recognizes that its choking of all public space could backfire, has agreed to allow fans to attend international matches played by the national team and Egyptian clubs.

In doing so, the ministry de facto acknowledged that it has put itself between a rock and hard place. Many Egyptians blame the national team's poor performance on the fact that fans have largely not been allowed into stadia to support their squad or their clubs since the popular revolt that toppled President Hosni Mubarak in 2011.

The continued ban risks the government shouldering the blame for the inability of the national team to maintain a track record of being Africa's most crowned squad. Egypt's national team was crushed in June when it was defeated 3:0 by Tanzania in a match in Alexandria from which fans were barred.

Sports minister Khaled Abdel-Aziz said the lifting was applicable to all home qualifiers for the 2017 African Cup of Nations and 2018 World Cup and international championship matches played by storied Cairo teams Al Ahli SC and Al Zamalek SC, two of Africa's top clubs.

"Fan support is crucial to Egypt's chances in the Nations Cup and World Cup. The authorities are aware of the importance of having the fans back in the stands," Abdel-Aziz said. Past Egyptian governments have basked in the success of the national team and used it to shore up their tarnished images.

The opening of international matches to the public however risks mounting anger among militant soccer fans and student protest groups in which the fans play a central role spilling onto the soccer pitch.

Egyptian media speculated that the ministry was testing the waters with its decision and that the move could lead to an overall lifting of the ban on spectators in stadia. A successful reopening of the stadia without incidents would boost a government whose image is dominated by brutal repression.

In calculating its risk, the ministry has several precedents to work with. A partial lifting of the ban in February was quickly re-imposed after some 20 fans were killed by security forces as they tried to force their way into a Cairo stadium. The fans were protesting against the government allowing only a limited number of people into the stadium and over manipulation of ticket sales to control which fans gained entry.

On the plus side, militant Ahli fans voluntarily left a stadium in November that they had occupied hours before their club was scheduled to play an African championship. The incident was a rare example in which Egyptian security forces agreed to a negotiated, peaceful resolution rather than a hard-handed crackdown.

In a deal negotiated by Al Ahli's management, the fans agreed to leave the stadium in exchange for being allowed to attend the match, being treated with respect rather than humiliated at security checks, and promising not to disrupt the match. Al Ahli won the championship in a match that proceeded without incident.

Militant fans have long been demanding a lifting of the spectator ban. Thousands of hard-core supporters of Al Ahli and Al Zamalek have attended their clubs' training sessions in recent months to demonstrate that it was not them but the security forces that were responsible for repeated violent incidents.

The interior ministry in lifting the ban for international matches is hoping that fans would not want to be blamed for failures of the national team or their clubs as a result of protests and violence in the stadium.

That remains a risky bet. Egyptian security forces have a history of impunity in which successive governments including that of general-turned-president Abdel Fattah al Sisi have allowed them to get away with mass killings of protesters, mass arrests and torture.

Successive governments, including that of al Sisi who staged a coup in 2013 to topple Egypt's first and only democratically elected president, Mohammed Morsi, a Muslim Brother, have backed away from seriously tackling badly needed security sector reform, a key driver of Egypt's continued turmoil.

Despite Al Ahli's successful negotiation of the November crisis and management's continued engagement with hard-line fan groups who played a key role in the protests that toppled

Mubarak and anti-government protests since, relations between the government and some clubs and fans are tense.

Zamalek president Mortada Mansour has accused the Ultras White Knights (UWK), the militant Zamalek fan group, of attempting to assassinate him and has tried to persuade the courts to ban militant soccer support groups as terrorist organizations.

Mortada stopped just short of praising the death of 20 Zamalek supporters in the stadium incident in February but prided himself on having requested the security force action that led to their deaths.

Large numbers of militant soccer fans are behind bars either for soccer-related incidents or because of their role in mass anti-government demonstrations in universities and flash protests in neighbourhood in which they played a key role.

The limited lifting of the spectator ban potentially creates a space for fans to let off steam and vent pent-up anger and frustration in a country that allows for no controlled public space and has created feeding grounds for radicalization.

The risk for politicized fans considering exploiting a rare opportunity is not only a harsh government response, one they have grown accustomed to, but alienating themselves from a public that is likely to see the matches as a rare chance to get away from the daily grind.

**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/2015/09/egypt-throws-dice-with-partial-lifting.html>

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