

COMMENTARY

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Egyptian Soccer Fans put Youth Disillusion with Elections on Public Display

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As Egyptian general-turned-president Abdel Fattah Al Sisi struggled to get Egyptians to cast their vote in parliamentary elections, militant soccer fans put widespread youth disillusionment with the president's autocratic rule on public display.

More than 10,000 fans rushed in response to a call by Ultras Ahlawy, the militant support group of storied Cairo club Al Ahli SC, to the Mokhtar al-Touch Stadium to watch their storied team train. It was the club's first training since it won the Egyptian Super Cup.

Ultras Ahlawy issued the brief call on its Facebook page that has more than 1.1 million followers. Ultras Ahlawy together with other militant fan groups has played a key role in anti-government protests in the last 4.5 years starting with the 2011 popular revolt that toppled President Hosni Mubarak.

Fan neglect of the election reflected a widespread sentiment among Egyptian youth expressed by a hashtag #badalमतantakhib or #insteadofvoting that was trending on Twitter.

"Youth see no hope for the future in the current elections. They are the ones that are every day the most attacked and accused of treason on television no matter whether they are engaged in politics or sports. How can they trust you and participate with you in the political process?," activist Khaled Talima asked on Facebook.

Sisi's government failed to persuade Egyptians to cast their vote in the first of a two-stage parliamentary election, the first since Sisi staged a coup in 2013 that toppled Mohammed Morsi,

Egypt's first and only democratically elected president. The second phase of the election is scheduled for 22 and 23 November.

Sisi gave government employees half a day off in the hope that they would use their free time to go to polling stations. Journalists surveying the stations estimated turnout at 15 percent at best despite pro-government and state-owned television stations repeatedly urging Egyptians to cast their vote.

The fan's demonstrative neglect of the election and the low turnout highlight Sisi's failed attempt over the last two years to depoliticize a generation that was emboldened by its success in overthrowing Mubarak after 30 years in office and angered by the fact that youth were subsequently side lined and have since seen their hard fought achievements rolled back.

Youth disillusionment was already evident in low participation in a constitutional referendum last year that paved the way for this week's election.

The new constitution envisages a transition from autocratic rule to a presidential system with an empowered parliament. In theory, the new parliament would have the power to impeach the president, question the prime minister and withdraw its confidence in him. A majority of the 568 seats in parliament will however be filled by individuals rather than parties, many of who were associated with Mubarak's now defunct National Democratic Party (NDP)

Critics of Sisi fear that with major opposition groups like the Brotherhood barred from participating in the election, the new parliament will be packed with supporters of the president who could call for a new referendum to revise the constitution, curb the assembly's powers and strengthen the power of the presidency.

Sisi has ruled with an iron fist since coming to power. He has banned Morsi's Brotherhood as a terrorist organization and cracked down on both Islamist and secular opposition and dissent. Thousands have been put behind bars and more than 1,000 people have been killed by security forces since the 2013 coup.

Sisi has promised to involve youth by creating a National Youth Council, increasing opportunities for youth participation in politics, and enhancing scholarship openings for study overseas.

At the same time, the president has warned students and youth from engaging in activity "with questionable political goals that serve the interests of unpatriotic groups in their endeavour to destroy the nation."

Sisi's warning appears to have fallen on deaf ears with a large number of students, fans and youths evidently putting little faith in his promises.

In a statement, Ultras Ahlawy called on soccer fans to attend Al Ahli's first match in the Egyptian Premier League's new season. Fans have largely been banned from stadia since the popular revolt against Mr. Mubarak erupted in 2011 in a bid to prevent stadia from becoming opposition rallying points and a staging ground for fan protests.

"Football fans want to return to their ordinary place. Ahli fans attended the Orlando Pirates match and a lot of training sessions without any problems," the group noted, referring to a recent African Confederation Cup game for which the spectator ban was briefly lifted.

"We suggested many ideas to solve the problem (of the ban) but in vain. Speaking about the difficulty of allowing fans to attend matches amid the current parliamentary elections is strange. If the officials are busy with the elections, they can let the football fans go to games. They can manage the matter better by themselves," the statement said.

"Starting the new season without fans is an extension of killing Egyptian football, so all the group members will be gathering at the Petro sport stadium to attend the match. Football is for fans," it said in a move that could renew confrontation with security forces.

Sports Minister Khaled Abdel-Aziz promised to allow fans to attend home matches of the Egyptian national team but has yet to make good on his promise. The Egyptian Football Association has said for years that it was negotiating security arrangements with the interior ministry that would lead to a lifting of the spectator ban.

Some 20 fans were killed in February, when fans tried to gain entry to a stadium for a match for which the spectator ban had been lifted in an incident that reinforced the need for reform of a security force that for years has been allowed to act with impunity.

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/2015/10/egyptian-soccer-fans-put-youth.html>

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