

## **COMMENTARY**

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### **Egypt hopes soccer will help polish its Tarnished image**

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**A**n Egyptian businessman with close ties to general-turned-president Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, has submitted a bid for the broadcasting rights of the Confederation of African Football (CAF), in a move that is widely seen as an effort to polish the image of Egypt, tarnished by massive abuse of human rights, failing economic policies, and a military coup that put in 2013 an end to the country's first democratic experiment.

The \$600 million bid also challenges the predominance among Arab satellite broadcasters of BeIN, the Qatar-owned sports network that is part of Al Jazeera, and has bought broadcasting rights across the globe.

Finally, if successful, the bid could help improve Al-Sisi's domestic standing at a time that the president is struggling economically and being propped up by funding from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Many Egyptians cannot afford BeIN's subscription rates that range from \$7.5 to \$54 a month.

Relations between Qatar, a supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Egypt have been strained ever since Al-Sisi three years ago toppled Mohammed Morsi, a Brother and Egypt's first and only democratically elected president.

Morsi was sentenced in June to 25 years in prison for passing state secrets to Qatar in a case in which several Al Jazeera journalists were convicted in absentia to either death or long prison terms. Al Jazeera was taken off the air within hours of the 2013 coup and three of its journalists were held in prison and sentenced to years in jail before ultimately being released.

The businessman, Ahmed Abou Hashima, a steel and media magnate with close ties to Al-Sisi, has the support of members of parliament close to the Egyptian leader despite Arab media reports that the Brotherhood supported him in 2012 when Morsi was in office. Abou Hashima sought help at the time, the reports said, in his high-profile divorce, reportedly involving a \$30 million settlement, from Haifa Wehbe, one of the Arab world's most prominent singers and actors.

Abou Hashima's effort to improve Egypt's international image by buying African broadcasting rights builds on Egypt's past African soccer glory. Egypt's national team is the African Cup of Nations' most crowned squad, winning the title in the three consecutive years that preceded the 2011 popular revolt that overthrew President Hosni Mubarak. "We do our best to project Egypt's name in all sectors in Africa, especially sport," Abou Hashima said in a Facebook posting on August 30.

Pro-Sisi deputies linked Abou Hashima's bid more directly to the mass anti-Morsi protests in the summer of 2013 that had been supported by the military and security forces and paved the way for Al-Sisi's takeover.

"The proposal the Egyptian company presented to buy the broadcasting rights of African football honours the Egyptian people after the 30 June glorious revolution," Hamdy al-Sisi, a namesake of the president, lawmaker and member of the lower house's Youth and Sports Committee, told Al-Monitor.

"Egypt is the main key driver of the Middle East and it remains the pulse of the Arab world. The fact that an Egyptian company obtains the broadcasting rights of matches indicates a lot, including Egypt's recovery from its crisis as it has come back to the African arena," added Mahmoud al-Sayyed, another lawmaker and committee member.

Proper marketing of the broadcasting rights would project Egypt despite a violent insurgency in the Sinai as stable, demonstrate public support for Al-Sisi, and boost tourism, Al-Sayyed said.

Abou Hashima's bid appears also to be part of broader government strategy to harness soccer in its effort to garner domestic popularity. The bid was announced days after Al-Sisi ordered a feasibility study for the construction of a new stadium in the Suez Canal city of Port Said, one of Egypt's least populated and most neglected governorates.

Seventy-two members of Ultra Ahlawy, one of the militant soccer support groups that played a key role in the overthrow of Mubarak and subsequent resistance to military rule died in Port Said's existing stadium in 2012 in a controversial, politically loaded brawl. It was Egypt's worst ever sporting incident. Port Said did not figure in the government's investment plan that was presented last year to an economic development conference.

Many in Port Said resent the fact that court proceedings have laid blame for the incident with militant supporters of Al Masri SC, some of whom have been sentenced to death, and two security officials in the city. Seven other security officers were acquitted. The defendants have appealed the verdicts.

Al-Sisi sought to co-opt Ultras Ahlawy earlier this year on the fourth anniversary of the incident by offering them to independently, investigate what happened. The ultras turned the offer down, arguing that they could not simultaneously act as accuser and judge.

Al-Sisi made his offer as militant soccer fans formed the backbone of anti-government student protests that were brutally squashed. The protests were not only against the harsh repression of the Al-Sisi regime but also against its economic and social policies which failed to create public sector jobs for graduates and more places for students at universities.

Al-Sisi's effort to use sports to his advantage sought to exploit the fact that physical exercise, including, jogging and biking, enjoys unprecedented popularity among Egyptian youth. In one event, Al-Sisi led military academy cadets in 2014 on a well-publicized bicycle ride around Cairo.

"The young people can't go out demonstrating, but they can go out to run," sports coach Ramy A. Saleh told The New York Times. "It's connected with the withdrawal from public life by young people," added political scientist Ezzedine C. Fishere. "Everyone who had participated in 2011 (in the popular revolt) started to move to the private sphere, some took refuge in depression, some in nihilistic activities and many in fitness — not just fitness, but taking care of oneself," Fishere said.

Sports may for now prove to be a way for Al-Sisi to engage with youth who in the absence of post-2011 politics find expression in physical activity. If history is however, any guide, sports could also turn on him as was evident with soccer fans being the foremost group to resist the Mubarak regime physically in the years before the president's downfall

Al-Sisi appears to recognize that with Egyptian stadiums remaining largely closed to the public for much of the years since 2011. That didn't stop Ultras Ahlawy from rioting in July during a match against a Moroccan team. Some 80 ultras were arrested.

**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/2016/09/egypt-hopes-soccer-will-help-polish-its.html>

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