

COMMENTARY

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Egyptian Stage Set for Confrontations with Ultras

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Militant, street battle-hardened soccer fans played a key role in toppling Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and resisting the military rulers who succeeded him. Almost three years later and four months after the military removed from office Egypt's first democratically elected president, the stage appears to be set for renewed confrontations with the fans, one of the country's largest civic groups.

The potential for confrontation is compounded by Egypt's 6:1 loss in a crucial 2014 World Cup qualifier against Ghana. Opposition forces and supporters of deposed President Mohammed Morsi, a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, blame Egypt's defeat on military strongman General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi. "You jinxed us, el-Sisi," said Mohammed Dardeer on Facebook, describing the general as "religiously defiled" in a comment reminiscent of perceptions in Iran that blamed the Islamic republic's soccer failures on the intense interest in the game displayed by former president Ahmadinejad.

Ghana defeated Egypt at a time that the country is deeply divided between supporters and opponents of the military that deposed President Mohamed Morsi and brutally cracked down on his Brotherhood. The coup prompted many of the military's opponents to view the national team as representing the regime rather than the country much as militant soccer fans did under Mubarak. That earned them charges of being traitors by those who see the Brotherhood rather than the military as the greatest obstacle to resolving Egypt's political crisis.

"When a large number of Egyptians, too many to be ignored, felt happy after our national team lost to Ghana, didn't the coup organizers ask themselves why they felt this way towards their national team? They most likely will not bother themselves to think about it, but will claim

naively, 'It is out of spite so that no victories, not even in football, will be attributed to General Al-Sisi... Al-Sisi's Egypt is no longer the Egypt of love that celebrates victories, as tyranny and injustice cannot win; they are defeated in every aspect, whether militarily, as in 1967 (Israel's defeat of Egypt), or on the sports field. It is ironic that one of the coup leaders called the football result a catastrophe, which was what the 1967 defeat was called.'" quipped Amira Abo el-Fetouh in the Middle East Monitor.

Ghana's stunning thrashing of Egypt did persuade the military to allow some 30,000 fans to attend the return match in an out-of-the-way Cairo stadium scheduled for 19 November despite a ban on spectators in stadia designed to avert political protests. The symbolism of Egypt's performance – victory or defeat – in the return match weighs heavy on the game given the regime's need to project itself more positively internationally and to counter the analogy of defeats on the military and the soccer battlefields. The symbolism is all the greater with General Al-Sisi also celebrating his birthday on 19 November.

The government's decision to open the World Cup qualifier to spectators prompted Mohammed Yussef, the manager of storied Cairo club Al Ahli SC, to demand that fans also be allowed to attend the team's African Championship match in Cairo on 9 November against South Africa's Orlando Pirates. Al Ahli fans are among Egypt's most militant and have been in the frontlines of the country's major protests in recent years. "We need fans to attend this very important match. Ahli is battling for the reputation of Egyptian football," Md. Yussef said in a reference to the Ghanaian humiliation of the Egyptian national team.

But even without politics intruding on Egypt's struggle to qualify for next year's Cup in Brazil, potential flashpoints for confrontations with militant soccer fans are emerging. A court in the Suez Canal city of Port Said this week postponed until December the retrial of 11 militant supporters of Al Masri SC sentenced for premeditated murder to jail terms ranging from 15 years to life for their role in last year's politically loaded brawl in which 74 members of Al Ahli were killed. Last year's sentencing to death of 21 of their colleagues sparked an uprising in Port Said and other Suez Canal cities. If the sentences against the 11 are upheld, renewed protests are likely. By the same token, a reversal could spark protests in Cairo by Al Ahli supporters.

Police used to tear gas to disperse hundreds of Al Ahli supporters wearing their signature red T-shirts inscribed with the words: "Ultras are not criminals." The fans were protesting the arrest of 25 of their colleagues who allegedly had tried to storm a Cairo airport terminal as the club's handball team returned from Morocco. A member of the Ultras White Knights, the militant support group of Al Ahli Cairo rival Al Zamalek SC, was killed by security forces earlier this month, when the group tried to storm the club's headquarters demanding the resignation of its president.

Youth groups and soccer fans have warned that a draft protest law approved by the military-backed government that is currently being reviewed by interim president Adly Mansour paves the way for the return of the police state they had sought to destroy with the overthrow of Mr. Mubarak. The law gives security forces rather than the judiciary the right to cancel or postpone a planned protest or change its location. It obliges organizers to provide authorities in advance details of the planned protest, including the identity of the organizers and their demand. It further bans protests in within a 100 meter radius of government buildings.

In a statement, the 6 April youth movement warned: “Time will not go back to the era of rulers issuing laws to silence their opponents.

Note: This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced with the author’s permission. Web link:
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