

COMMENTARY

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Soccer fans threaten to revive stadia as battle fields

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With multiple potential flashpoints coinciding, militant, street-battle hardened Egyptian soccer fans threaten to align stadia alongside the country's universities as battle grounds against the armed forces and the military-backed government.

The soccer support groups known as ultras have warned that they would disrupt Egypt's newly revived league competition if spectators continue to be barred from stadia. The leagues resumed last month after being suspended for almost two years. Initially the suspension was intended to prevent further violence in the wake of the death in Port Said in February 2012 of 74 fans in a politically-loaded brawl for which the fans hold the military and security forces responsible.

The suspension was repeatedly extended for fear that the fans, who played a key role in the 2011 ousting of President Hosni Mubarak and had turned stadia in the years preceding his toppling into battle grounds, would again use stadia as a platform for expression of political dissent.

The militant fan organizations, which constitute one of Egypt's largest civic society groups, were originally divided in attitudes towards last year's military overthrow of Mohammad Morsi, Egypt's first democratically elected president. Those divisions have begun to whither much as popular support for the military has started to fray at the edges as a result of the hard-handed, brutal crackdown on Islamist and non-Islamist opposition to armed forces-backed rule.

A recent Pew Research centre poll reflects Egypt's stark polarization. Yet, contrary to public perception that a vast majority of Egyptians would opt for stability rather than democracy, slightly more than half of those polled said they chose democracy even if it meant political instability.

That sense reflects sentiment among many militant soccer fans who like the Muslim Brotherhood have long been targets of security services that were widely despised not only because they

confronted the militants in stadia but also because of their corruption and brutal tactics in popular neighbourhoods from which the fans hail.

The threat to again turn stadia into battlefields came as Egypt prepares for a referendum next week on a constitution that would preserve the military's key long-standing perks and privileges despite what are likely to be cosmetic changes unless they are embedded in a pluralistic context.

The timing of the ultras' threat heightened the risk of further civic unrest. It preceded the 25 January anniversary of the beginning of Egypt's popular revolt, the 1 February anniversary of the Port Said incident, the 11 February anniversary of the downfall of Mubarak, and the postponement until next month of emotionally charged appeals of many of those convicted for responsibility for the deaths in Port Said.

The resumption of soccer leagues means stadia could join universities which have been one of the few platforms for anti-government and anti-military protest given that most public spaces are heavily policed since the coup against Morsi. The university protests foiled the regime's hope that a draconian new protest would make collective public expression of dissent all but impossible.

Student and soccer fan activism have long been drivers of Egyptian protest. Fans acted as the shock troops of the anti-Mubarak revolt as well as anti-military protests prior to the election of Morsi in July 2012. Some analysts suggest the revolt against Mubarak may not have succeeded without the ultras' ability to confront security forces and ensure upkeep of the revolutionary zeal that propelled the protests forward.

In a statement this week on their Facebook page that has 446,000 followers, Ultras White Knights (UWK), the support group of storied Cairo club Al Zamalek SC, said: "Shame on you ... down with your regime and government. Nothing will prevent us from returning to the stands, it's our right... Either a return for the fans [to the stands] to breathe life into the competition or a final chapter for the fake and void competition... Supporters must continue their pursuit of their right, while the tournament goes to Hell. Only God can stop us."

Past experience shows that attempts to repress soccer fans under Mubarak only served to steel their resolve. Similarly, brutal police tactics propelled militant soccer fans in Turkey to join last year's anti-government Gezi Park protests in Istanbul.

In November, supporters of crowned Cairo club Al Ahli SC, Zamalek's arch rival, dashed the government's hopes of wrapping itself in the club's eighth triumph as African champion when they clashed with security forces during the tournament's final and commemorated the Port Said dead with chants, posters, bright red flares and fireworks. Striker Ahmed Abdul Zaher celebrated his decisive goal in the final with a four-fingered hand signal - a gesture that commemorates the sit-in of Morsi supporters at Cairo's Rabaa al-Adawiya mosque which was violently cleared by security forces in August, leaving hundreds killed.

Despite apologizing for the gesture, Abdul Zaher was censored by both Al Ahli and the Egyptian Football Association (EFA). He was also denounced by the Egyptian sports minister Taher

Abouzeid. Abdul Zaher has since moved to Libyan premier league team Al Ittihad. He was the second athlete in as many weeks to be penalized for showing the anti-military four finger sign. Kung Fu fighter Mohamed Youssef was suspended for a year for showing the Rabaa sign after he won a gold medal in the Sports Accord Combat Games competition in St. Petersburg.

Egyptian soccer referee Atef El-Afi was so intimidated by the disciplinary measures that he signalled a four-minute stoppage of a match of a league match on New Year's Day by holding up both his hands with four fingers showing to ensure that it would not be interpreted as a political statement. I just didn't want to be misunderstood," "El-Afi told sports website FilGoal.

His concern was not unfounded. Conspiracy theories and paranoia, partly inspired by the government and pro-government media, are omnipresent. Egypt's public prosecutor, acting last week on a complaint by a notorious conspiracy theorist, interrogated officials of mobile phone operator Vodafone about allegedly coded messages for terrorists embedded in one of the company's online videos. The video featured Abla Fahita (Sister Fahita), a digital puppet who became a digital star by mocking housewives who source recipes and exchange gossip on the internet.

In a precursor to the branding of the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization and an indication of how the government may handle protesting soccer fans, Egyptian government and pro-government media as well as club executives last fall denounced the ultras as terrorists and suggested they were being funded by unidentified political interest groups.

The campaign like the branding of the Brotherhood is a tactic increasingly adopted by autocrats and illiberal democrats across the Middle East and North Africa in a bid to criminalize their opponents. Turkey's ant-terrorism office last year published a video suggesting that peaceful protest was a precursor for terrorism. The video showed a young woman participating in the Gezi Park protests subsequently putting on a suicide bombers vest.

"Nothing has changed, we're still the terrorists we were before the revolution...we are still demanding what is right and fighting for it, laying down our own lives to fight some ignorant people, for whom suppression is a way of life and whose imagination is sick," the UWK said last October in a defiant response to efforts to defame it.

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: <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2014/01/soccer-fans-threaten-to-revive-stadia.html>

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