

COMMENTARY

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Egypt's Banning of Ultras Constitutes Effort to Outlaw Legitimate Opposition

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An expected decision by Egyptian soccer authorities to ban as terrorist organizations groups of militant soccer fans builds on the definition by Arab autocrats of legitimate, democratic opposition forces as violent threats to their grip on power. By leaving youth with ever fewer, if any, options for venting pent-up anger and frustration, it risks pushing them towards violent, militant Islamist groups.

In banning the ultras – groups of fervent, well-organized, street battle-hardened soccer fans -- authorities would outlaw a social force that rivalled in appeal the Muslim Brotherhood that was criminalized last year as a terrorist organization with the military coup that toppled Mohammad Morsi, the country's only democratically elected president.

The proposed ban constitutes a response to the re-emergence of soccer pitches across North Africa as venues of anti-government protest. It also entrenches a policy that Egyptian general-turned-president Abdel Fattah el Sisi has in common with rulers such as Bahraini King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad who have redefined the concept of terrorism by incorporating alternative voices that in any unbiased assessment would fail to meet the criteria.

It is a policy that is designed to force domestic public opinion and the United States to choose between autocracy or illiberal democracy and the threat of terrorism. It echoes the argument used by ousted autocrats including Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, Tunisia's Zine El Abdeine Ben Ali and Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh to justify their repressive policies.

A formal ban is expected during a forthcoming meeting of the Senior Sporting Clubs Committee (SSCC) that groups the heads of Egypt's major clubs. Mortada Mansour, the committee's head and president of Al Zamalek SC, one of two storied and crowned Cairo clubs, has accused Ultras White Knights (UWK), Zamalek's militant support group, of last month trying to assassinate him.

In a blowback to the walk-up to Mubarak's downfall and the subsequent anti-military protests, UWK said recently on its Facebook page that has more than 600,000 followers: "The truth is, we took the streets because we cannot be quiet in the face of injustice." A recent UWK song accused Mortada of being a stooge of el Sisi.

UWK last month stormed Zamalek's headquarters and demanded Mansour's resignation for renegeing on a promise to lift a nationwide 2.5 year ban on spectators attending soccer matches.

Authorities remanded 36 UWK ultras in custody for 15 days after a clash with security forces in which the fans were demanding the release of fans suspected of the attempted murder. The 36 were accused of breaking Egypt's draconic anti-protest law, belonging to a group opposed to the law and the constitution, creating chaos, damaging public and private property, interrupting traffic and illegal possession of firearms.

"Article No. 3 of the charter of the committee makes it necessary for armed soccer fan groups to be dissolved. There is no hope in the members of Ultras White Knights. The relationship between these members and the officials of our club has reached the point of blood and gunfire," Mansour said. In separate remarks, Mansour said he had secured the support of el Sisi for his fight against terrorism. He said he had asked the president to convene a meeting of the SSCC.

The call to ban the groups that are largely akin to similar controversial but legal soccer fan groups in Europe, Latin America and elsewhere in the world follows the killing 2.5 years ago of 74 members of Ultras Ahlawy, the militant support group of Al Ahli SC, Zamalek's arch rival one of Egypt and Africa's most storied and crowned clubs, in a politically loaded soccer brawl in the Suez Canal City of Port Said.

The brawl was widely seen as an attempt by the military and the security forces that got out of hand to cut down to size a force that played a key role to the toppling in 2011 of President Hosni Mubarak and subsequent opposition to military rule. Ultras constituted the foremost group in the waning years of the Mubarak regime and subsequent military rule capable of sustained physical resistance. Fiercely independent, passionately loyal to their club, and aggressive in support for their team, the ultras constituted the one force that refused to shy away from sustained confrontation with security forces whose strategy was limited to intimidation and brute force.

The expected banning also comes after repeated clashes in recent months between the ultras and security forces fuelled by a ban since Port Said on spectators attending matches; repeated harassment of the soccer groups and attempts by authorities to portray them as criminals, thugs and hooligans; and mounting agitation by the ultras against pro-regime soccer authorities.

The coming days will tell whether the ultras will resist their potential banning. The lifting of the ban on spectators for a 10 September African Cup of Nations qualifier in Cairo between Egypt and Tunisia could offer the ultras an opportunity to make a stand. The retrial of those held responsible for the Port Said incident, including 21 supporters of the canal city's Al Masri SC who were sentenced to death, constitutes a second potential flashpoint.

While there is little doubt that ultras pride themselves on their violent confrontations with security forces on the principle shared by their brethren across the globe of ACAB, All Cops are Bastards, the militants insist that they exclusively resort to violence in self-defence. That is more often than not the case with regimes that refuse to engage with their critics and opt instead for often bloody repression.

In the absence of due process, the assertion that ultras are terrorists has yet to be substantiated. Although Egyptians constitute the second largest contingent of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, the outing of some self-declared soccer fans-turned-Islamist fighters like Younes, a 22-year old student at Cairo's citadel of Islamic learning at Al Azhar University, who joined the Islamic State (IS) the jihadist group that controls a swath of Syria and Iraq, fails to prove the ultras' association as a group with terrorism.

More alarming for el Sisi is the cooperation between IS and Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, a Sinai-based group that has killed hundreds of members of the Egyptian security forces over the last year. "We will not be able to change the situation in Egypt from inside, but Egypt is to be opened from abroad," Younes said in a Facebook interview with Reuters speaking as an Islamist fighter rather than a soccer fan.

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/2014/09/egypts-banning-of-ultras-constitutes.html>

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