

## **COMMENTARY**

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### **Egyptian Campuses and Soccer Emerge as Flashpoint in Resistance to President El-Sisi**

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Soccer fans exploiting stadia as contested public space emerged more than three years ago as a key force in anti-government protests that toppled Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and opposition to subsequent military rule. With stadia closed to spectators for much of the period since then, protesting students backed by militant football fans have turned university campuses into the new stadia with hundreds detained and scores killed. Theirs is a battle for public space and resistance to efforts by general-turned-president Abdel Fattah El-Sisi to depoliticize youth emboldened by its success in overthrowing a dictator after 30 years in office and angered by their being side-lined in the wake of their successful revolt and the rolling back of heavily fought achievements.

With El Sisi employing brute force by security forces, a private security firm reportedly owned by generals and regime-friendly businessmen, and Mubarak-era thugs, and a crackdown on academic freedom to impose his will, flashpoints loom beyond campuses on the horizon. These potential flashpoints include a pending court case that could lead to the banning as a terrorist organization of the Ultras White Knights (UWK), the militant support group of storied Al Zamalek SC that played a crucial role in the uprising against Mubarak; the appeal against the sentencing to death of 21 people and lengthy prison sentence for others on charges that they were responsible for a 2012 politically loaded brawl in Port Said in which 74 Al Ahli SC fans died that is certain to spark protest once a verdict is announced; and the continued ban on spectators attending professional soccer matches.

The student protests have served to forge links between supporters of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood whose Mohammed Morsi, Egypt's first and only democratically elected president,

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El Sisi overthrew in a military coup last year, and secular youth groups that constituted the backbone of the 2011 popular uprising. The influence of Ultras Nahdawy, a group that was formed by militant pro-Brotherhood supporters of Zamalek and its arch rival, Al Ahli, is visible in video clips of the protests in which protesters much like militant soccer fans jump up and down while chanting and fire off collared flares and smoke bombs.

Human Rights groups have alleged excessive use of force in crackdowns on the protesters who demand the release of some 100 detained students, the reinstatement of at least 170 others expelled from universities, and the restoration of academic freedom. ““The Egyptian security forces have a bleak record of using arbitrary and abusive force against protesters including students. The lack of accountability for such violations, including unlawful killings, gives them the green light to carry on brutalizing protesters,” said Amnesty International Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

Against the backdrop of last year’s bloody crackdown on the Brotherhood, the arrest of tens of thousands of Islamist and secular regime critics, and the adoption of a draconic anti-protest law, El Sisi has sought to impose his will on universities by decreeing that the heads of universities should be government-appointed rather than elected; authorizing the dismissal of faculty with no right of appeal, and inserting a pledge to refrain from political activity in students’ housing contracts. The government’s concern about the role of soccer fans in protest was highlighted in recent days by a decision to move an Al Ahli match from Beni Suef, a town 115 kilometres south of Cairo, to Assiut that lies 200 kilometres further south of the Egyptian capital.

Lack of public space under Mubarak who tolerated no uncontrolled public space propelled highly politicized, well-organized, street battle-hardened soccer fans to the forefront of anti-government protest. History threatens to repeat itself under El Sisi even if the president acknowledges that the government has failed to reach out to youth under the age of 25 who account for half of the Egyptian population. That gap was fuelled by the side lining of the youth almost from the day that Mubarak was forced to resign. It was further evident with relatively few youth participating in a referendum under post-Morsi military-backed rule and in El-Sisi’s election. The low youth participation stood in stark contrast to the large numbers that participated in parliamentary elections in 2012 and the polls that brought Morsi to power.

El Sisi has promised to correct the situation 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 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.” El Sisi’s warning appears to have so far fallen on deaf ears with a large number of students, fans and youths evidently putting little faith in his promises.

“The student movement is and always will be an indication of the state of the country. Today in Egypt, as long as the students are active and protesting then the revolution is ongoing... The killing or arrest of those who oppose the regime with the intention of restricting or stifling political dissent will not silence nor destroy the idea and the resolve of what thousands have given their lives for since 25 January 2011, that of freedom, democracy, justice and an honourable dignified life,” wrote Oxford University scientist Walaa Ramadan on Middle East Monitor.

She warned that El Sisi was facing “a generation which is adamant to fulfil its dreams and hold on to its liberty, a generation which toppled a historic dictator within days and has since resolved to give their lives to achieve the freedoms they fought for...”

**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/2014/10/egyptian-campuses-and-soccer-emerge-as.html>

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