

COMMENTARY

No.268

Tuesday, 24 February 2015

Soccer Deaths Renews Spotlight on Egypt's Notorious Security Forces

James M. Dorsey

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

A stampede at a Cairo stadium earlier this month, much like a politically-loaded soccer brawl in the Suez Canal city of Port Said three years ago, is shining a spotlight on Egypt's unreformed, unabashedly violent, and politically powerful police and security forces amid confusion over what precisely happened and how many fans died.

Amid security forces holding fans and fans holding police responsible and conflicting assertions of the number of people who died in the incident one thing stands out: the deep-seated distrust and animosity between significant segments of the Egyptian public and an unreformed security force that was long the hated symbol of the regime of toppled President Hosni Mubarak; played a key role in persuading the military in 2013 to overthrow Egypt's first and only democratic elected president; and has since left a bloody trail of brutal violence as evidenced by the deaths of some 1,400 anti-government protesters in the last 19 months.

In a report, Amnesty International underlined the persistent lack of accountability of Egypt's security forces. "The Egyptian government has, as of yet, failed to hold any security officers accountable for these killings. A fact-finding committee established by former interim president Adly Mansour to investigate the killings also failed to hold any security officer accountable for these killings." It noted that the stadium deaths came barely two weeks after the killing of Shaimaa Al-Sabbagh by security forces sparked widespread outrage.

A 31-year-old protester, Al-Sabbagh, was shot, according to eye witnesses by masked policemen after they attacked a small procession aiming to lay flowers on Tahrir Square in memory of Egypt's derailed 2011 revolution. An editorial in Al-Ahram, Egypt's foremost state-owned

newspaper, in an unusual break with its towing of the government line, condemned Al-Sabbagh's killing as cold-blooded murder for which it held the police responsible.

"The invulnerable facts conveyed by the eyewitness accounts from Shaimaa's partners in the demonstration, and by the footage of her killing, clearly indicate the killer, the misuse of power and a failure to implement the law," Al-Ahram editor Ahmed Sayed Naggar said in the editorial. Naggar called on general-turned-president Abdel Fattah El-Sisi to ensure that justice was served in Al-Sabbagh's case. The responsibility for doing so, he wrote, is "on all our shoulders, first and foremost on the elected president entrusted to protect the souls of this nation's sons from the abuse of power."

Naggar's editorial was believed to signal differences within the government and a realization among some senior officials that excessive security force violence was fuelling anti-government sentiment and damaging Egypt's image. That realization is likely to be reinforced by the stadium incident and could spark some degree of reform of the police and security forces

The stakes for El-Sisi are high given that police brutality was one driver for the mass protests in 2011 that forced Mubarak to resign after 30 years in office. Stadiums were a key arena where security force violence contributed to the build-up of resistance to the Mubarak regime in the four years prior to the president's ouster.

As a result, professional soccer matches have either been suspended or largely played behind closed doors since Mubarak's downfall. The closures did little to stymie soccer-related violence that peaked when a decision to allow a limited number of fans into the Cairo stadium erupted in demands for broader access and a total lifting of the ban.

The Amnesty report described various incidents of excessive force by security forces in clashes with soccer fans since the fall of Mubarak. Amnesty said security forces had employed force "on a scale not seen" since the uprising against Mubarak in early 2011 during six days of vicious battles on Cairo's Mohammed Mahmoud Street in November 2011 in which 51 people were killed. It said security forces used live ammunition, shotgun pellets, tear gas and beatings.

"In all the cases documented by Amnesty International, live ammunition and shotgun pellets were used in circumstances where those killed or injured posed no imminent risk to the life of the security forces or others. Many people told Amnesty International that shotgun pellets were fired towards protesters from a distance of just a few metres. This caused many injuries to the eyes, leading to loss of sight in many cases," the report said. It said only one security officer, Mahmoud Sobhi Shannawi, who was nicknamed the eye-hunter for targeting protesters' eyes, was the only officer to have been charged for the killing and injuring of protesters on Mohamed Mahmoud Street and that his trial was still ongoing

Some two months later, security forces killed another 16 fans and injured hundreds of others in four days of protests in the wake of the Port Said incident. Fans accused the interior ministry of at the very least failing to protect the Al-Ahli fans in Port Said if not having orchestrated the incident. Nine security officials were among 75 people charged with responsibility for the incident. Only two of the security officials were sentenced to prison sentences while 21 Al-Masri fans were given a death sentence. The case is winding its way through the appeal process.

In a series of recommendations, Amnesty suggested that the government:

- Announce its firm commitment to reform the police and security apparatus and bring legislation governing it and its forces' activities in line with international human rights standards
- Publish a clear structure of the various security branches with a clear chain of command
- Establish a vetting system to ensure that, pending investigation, members of the police and others about whom there is evidence of serious human rights violations do not remain or are not placed in positions where they could repeat such violations
- Review all standard operational procedures to be make them as clear and as unambiguous as possible and provide adequate training on them and other standards to the police force and make them public when possible
- Ensure that police receive adequate training in soft-skills, such as negotiation, persuasion, mediation and trust building, to enable them to de-escalate situations and have a constructive relationship with the population
- Establish an independent accountability and oversight body with authority over all aspects of police operations. Such a body should have an independent, effective and impartial complaints mechanism that can deal with complaints about police or security forces' misconduct and human rights violations
- Issue clear instructions to all offices of the Public Prosecution that all allegations of abuses by the police are to be fully investigated and without undue delay
- Ensure that all members of the police force suspected of unlawful killing and injuries in policing demonstrations or in prisons and other detention centres; or for torture or other ill-treatment; including those who committed the violations and anyone who ordered others to commit them, are tried in proceedings that meet international standards of fair trial.

The most benign explanation for the bloody track record of the police and the security forces is that they lack training and experience in crowd control. That explanation fails to wash however given that the record dates back many years in which calls for better training of a force that routinely employed non-commissioned thugs to do its dirty work were deliberately rejected or ignored and in which the security forces did everything to maintain their position as a pillar of repression that for all practical matters was above the law.

In February 2012, police and security forces stood aside as 74 fans of storied Cairo club Al-Ahli SC died in a stampede in a stadium in Port Said sparked by an attack by supporters of rival Al-Masri SC and allegedly unknown armed elements. The incident is widely viewed as an effort backed by security forces and the military to cut down to size militant Al-Ahli supporters who like their arch rivals from Al-Zamalek SC played a key role in the toppling of Mubarak and protests against all subsequent Egyptian governments.

Like in Port Said, the interior ministry which oversees the security forces rejects any responsibility for the deaths a week ago in Cairo as a result of police firing tear gas into a narrow corridor of metal barricades and barbed wire as thousands of fans waited to enter the Air Defence stadium. Yet, like in Port Said, a video shows that at the start of the stampede fans begged the police to open the stadium gates to prevent casualties. The interior ministry has dismissed the video as a fabrication.

The incident has highlighted Egypt's unabated polarization that erupted in June 2013 with military and security-force backed mass protests against the government of elected President Mohammed Morsi. That polarization has spilt into soccer with supporters of Al-Ahli and Al-Zamalek playing a key role in expanding anti-Sisi protests from the stadia to university campuses across Egypt in which scores have been killed.

The government despite announcing that it was investigating the stadium incident has left little doubt that it holds the Ultras White Knights (UWK), the militant, street battle-hardened support group of Zamalek, responsible for the deaths which it puts at 20 as opposed to a list of 43 names published by UWK that has gone viral on the Internet. Police have meanwhile arrested UWK members even before the investigation has been concluded.

A pro-government television host, Ahmed Moussa, demanded that the dead not be identified as martyrs in contrast to the victims of Port Said because they had died breaking the law by trying to enter the stadium without tickets. In denouncing the dead, Moussa was feeding into attempts by Zamalek president Mortada Mansour reportedly backed by the government to persuade the courts to outlaw UWK as a terrorist organization. So did the firing by Zamalek of centre-right Omar Gaber after he became the only Zamalek player to refuse to play the match while fans were being attacked by security forces outside the stadium.

In an interview on television, Mortada charged that Gaber was an ultra, a militant soccer fan. In response to a question about how fans of his club died, Mortada, who asserts that UWK tried to assassinate him, said, "ask the Muslim Brotherhood," the group of deposed president Morsi that has since been outlawed as a terrorist organization and that has suffered the brunt of security force brutality in the last 19 months. Mansour went as far as issuing a statement saying that he had asked police to intervene at the stadium to counter the fans "thuggery." At a news conference, Mortada went on to suggest that the fans had been paid to clash with security forces.

Gaber's firing, the refusal of the majority of Zamalek players to show solidarity with the victims of the incident outside the stadium, and Mortada's siding with the government in blaming the fans rather than the security forces for the deaths bodes ill for already strained relations between Zamalek's management, players and fans. The attitude of the club and the players will serve to reconfirm the ultras' analysis of the power structure of soccer in which management is a pawn of the regime, players are mercenaries who play for the highest bidder, and fans are the only true supporters of a team.

The stark dividing lines between management, players and fans coupled with the fans deep-seated distrust of the interior ministry and the security forces reinforced by the absence of any attempt by the government to project a unambiguous willingness to independently investigate and curb excessive police force is preparing the ground for further confrontation.

Not prone to reading tea leaves such as the Al-Ahram editorial, UWK has already sworn revenge. "We have no confidence in the justice system or the government's willingness to ensure that justice is served. We now have 43 martyrs. We have no choice: Soccer will not be played in Egypt until justice has been served and the rights of our martyrs have been secured," said one UWK member.

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/2015/02/soccer-deaths-renews-spotlight-on.html>

James M. Dorsey is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, co-director of the Institute of Fan Culture of the University of Würzburg, and the author of the blog, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer. Email: jmdorsey@questfze.com

As part of its editorial policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spelling and date formats to make the text uniformly accessible and stylistically consistent. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of the MEI@ND. Editor, MEI@ND: P R Kumaraswamy