

COMMENTARY

No.277

Monday, 20 April 2015

Attempts to Ban Egyptian Militant Soccer Fan Group Gather Momentum

James M. Dorsey

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

An Egyptian prosecutor has set the stage for the banning of a group of hard-core, militant soccer fans by charging them with accepting money and explosives from the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood to stage last month's Cairo football riot in which 22 people were killed.

The prosecutor, Hesham Barakat, said the brawl, which erupted when police forces opened fire with tear gas and birdshot to prevent members of the highly politicized, street battle-hardened Ultras White Knights (UWK), the support group of storied Al Zamalek SC, from forcing entry into a soccer match was staged to obstruct government efforts to attract massive foreign aid and investment.

The match was the first Egyptian Premier League game after a partial lifting of a ban on spectators attending matches imposed in February 2012 when 74 supporters of Zamalek arch rival Al Ahli SC were killed in a politically loaded brawl in Port Said.

Soccer fans have long been on the radar of the security forces because of their key role in the toppling in a popular revolt in 2011 of President Hosni Mubarak; their opposition to the subsequent military government that ruled Egypt for the first 17 months after the fall of Mubarak; and their resistance to the governments of democratically elected President Mohammed Morsi, a Muslim Brother, and the military-backed governments that followed a military coup against Morsi headed by general-turned-president Abdel Fatah Al Sisi in 2013.

Ultras Nahdawy, the only fan group that is not aligned with a soccer club and has explicitly defined itself as political, has played an important role in persistent anti-government protests on university campuses in the past year. Formerly supportive of the Muslim Brotherhood, Nahdawy which was formed by members of the UWK and Ultras Ahlawy, the Al Ahli support group, has insisted that it has distanced itself from the group after the Brotherhood was banned as a terrorist organization in the wake of Morsi's ouster.

Security forces arrested 52 students and UWK members who participated in a protest at Fayoum University. Twenty one of those arrested were handed over to the prosecution on charges of belonging to a terrorist organization and violating Egypt's draconic anti-protest law. A general strike demanding the release of the students and fans has since all but shut the university down.

Separately, a UWK leader, Said Moshagheb, was arrested on charges of being part of a UWK group that stormed Zamalek's offices and tried to assassinate the club's controversial president, Mortada Mansour, a long standing associate of Mubarak and Al Sisi. The UWK has confirmed the storming but repeatedly denied having attempted to kill Mansour, who claimed that he had been attacked with acid as he introduced Zamalek's new coach.

A video released by the UWK shows a man slapping Mansour, whom the fans have dubbed "a dog of the system," in a parking lot. In a statement, the UWK said they had thrown urine rather than acid at the Zamalek president. Moshagheb's trial is scheduled to begin soon.

Mortada has prided himself on asking the security forces to intervene to prevent fans from entering the Cairo stadium, charging that UWK had been paid to confront the security forces. In response to a journalist's question about how fans of his club had died, Mortada, said, "Ask the Muslim Brotherhood."

The charging of 16 UWK members and Muslim Brothers with responsibility for the Cairo soccer stadium incident follows failed attempts by Mansour to persuade the courts to outlaw the fan group as a terrorist organization. Two courts rejected Mansour's petition, saying they were not the competent authority. A lawyer for the UWK charged that the prosecution was moving ahead with proceedings against the group while ignoring petitions he filed on behalf of the UWK against Mansour and recently dismissed interior minister Mohamed Ibrahim.

The indictment coincided with the sentencing to death of Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Badie and 21 other members of the banned movement in two separate cases over incitement to violence. The 21 were convicted on charges of setting up an "operations room" to prepare attacks against the state in the weeks after the military ousted Morsi. The verdict, which can be appealed, was referred to Al-Azhar, Egypt's top Sunni Muslim authority that under Egyptian law has to give a non-binding advisory opinion on the death sentences.

In a statement, prosecutor Barakat said that "the prosecution's investigation proved that the terrorist Muslim Brotherhood, as part of its endeavour to bring down the pillars of stability of the country, used its relationship with cadres of the Zamalek club's fan group, the White Knights" to instigate the Cairo incident. It said the riot aimed to undermine the government's attempts to raise billions of dollars in foreign aid and investment at a conference attended in Sharm el Sheikh by heads of state and captains of industry.

The statement asserted further that "some of the suspects who belong to the Muslim Brotherhood have confessed to planning, funding and participating in these crimes to create a state of security destabilization and ruin the economic summit."

If so, the collaboration between the UWK and the Brotherhood would constitute a break with a fundamental principle of the group that is upheld by ultras or militant soccer fans across the globe, that they do not constitute political groupings. Ultras Nahdawy is the exception that confirms the rule even if the very nature of ultras groups makes them political despite their denials.

The emphasis on being non-political allows groups of ultras to maintain unity on their core principles – a passion for soccer, hard core support of their club and a distrust of authority and police and security forces – despite the fact that the political views of individual members can run the gamut from far left to far right and secular to religious.

Cairoscene, an Egyptian news website quipped that the assertion of a conspiracy between the UWK and the Brotherhood "seems ridiculous considering there was clear evidence that security was mismanaged. Fans were forced to enter through one singular metal cage, which ultimately collapsed. At the same time police fired tear gas at the crowds arguably fuelling the stampede that resulted in many of the deaths. Obviously, we cannot confirm the prosecutions claims, but believe that some of the responsibility of this tragedy should fall on the shoulders of the security officials, as they clearly failed to provide security."

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/2015/03/attempts-to-ban-egyptian-militant.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**