

COMMENTARY

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Egypt Moves Closer to Labelling Soccer Fans as Terrorists

James M. Dorsey

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Egypt has moved closer to banning as terrorist organizations militant soccer groups that form the backbone of opposition to autocratic rule with the arrest and pre-trial detention of five alleged members of the Ultras White Knights (UWK), the highly-politicized, street battle-hardened support group of storied Cairo club Al Zamalek SC.

The five men - Sayed Ali, Seif Kamel, Mahmoud El-Domiati, Abdallah Ghoneim and Anas Tawfik – were arrested on charges of joining a “terrorist entity” and attempting to topple the regime of general-turned-president Abdel Fattah Al Sisi.

The fans were first questioned by state security prosecutors and are scheduled to appear again before the prosecution on 24 April, according to Daily News Egypt. The paper quoted Revolutionary Socialists, a left-wing group, as saying the five men were being held separately in different prisons.

The fans were detained on the basis of a law adopted earlier this year that defines any group “practicing or intending to advocate by any means to disturb public order or endanger the safety of the community and its interests or risk its security or harm national unity” as a terrorist entity.

The employment of the law against the fans follows two failed attempts by Mortada Mansour, the controversial president of Zamalek, to persuade the courts to ban the UWK as a terrorist organization. Mortada has accused the group of trying to assassinate him. The courts refused to rule on his petition asserting that they were not the competent authority.

It also follows the dispersal of an anti-government protest near Cairo's Tahrir Square, scene of the mass protests in 2011 that toppled President Hosni Mubarak and 2013 that paved the way for a military coup against President Mohammed Morsi, Egypt's first and only democratically elected leader.

The demonstration was staged by Ultras Nahdawy, a group formed by UWK members and members of Ultras Ahlawy, the support group of Zamalek arch rival Al Ahli SC. Ultras Nahdawy is a driving force behind anti-government student protests in the past year on multiple Egyptian university campuses.

The protest was one of ten flash demonstrations across Cairo, weekly incidents often led by soccer fans and students whose protests have largely been driven off campus by increased security force control of universities.

"We are looking for alternatives outside the campus. We have managed to do so in neighbourhoods and smaller universities that are less controlled. We're looking at new strategies and options given that the risk is becoming too high. We are absolutely concerned that if we fail things will turn violent. Going violent would give the regime the perfect excuse. We would lose all public empathy," said Yusuf Salheen, a 22-year old leader of Students against the Coup. The group was formed after the brutal August 2013 crackdown staged by the Muslim Brotherhood in protest against the toppling of Morsi.

The group alongside Ultras Nahdawy with its 65,000 followers on Facebook has moved beyond its support for the Brotherhood to positioning itself as a defender of the ideals that fuelled the popular revolt in 2011. They see themselves as bulwarks against radicalization of a new generation prevalent among militant soccer fans who played a key role in the overthrow of Mubarak and subsequent anti-government protests that is apathetic, more nihilistic and has lost hope. New levels of repression by Al Sisi's government that surpass the authoritarianism of Mubarak's regime resulting in the death of more than 1,400 protesters and the arrest of thousands in the last two years constitute a feeding ground for radicalization.

"This is a new generation. It's a generation that can't be controlled. They don't read. They believe in action and experience. They have balls. When the opportunity arises they will do something bigger than we ever did," said a founder of the UWK who has since distanced himself from the group.

The emergence of a new generation coupled with the recognition by soccer fans and students that Morsi's government is history and cannot be restored has prompted them to focus on revival of the ideals of the 2011 revolt, sparking differences within the protest movement, particularly with those that join neighbourhood demonstrations at the spur of the moment.

“The people in the street protesting now fall into two simple categories - the first are over 30 and believe all this nonsense that Morsi is coming back to rule again, and that the coup will be defeated. The second group is under 30. We all realize that this is leading us to no victory, but we can’t stop. The numbers have sharply decreased. All of those still in the streets, I can swear that they have a (personal) vendetta with the regime, a relative who was killed or a relative detained in prison right now. My brother-in-law is in prison right now facing a sentence of 10 years, and I just can’t stop. I know that there is no point to what we are doing, but it is better than doing nothing,” a 20-year old law student in the Cairo neighbourhood of Matareya, an Islamist stronghold, told Middle East Eye.

The uphill battle of soccer fans and students for political change is hampered not only by the government’s relentless repression. It also is stymied by widespread apathy of an Egyptian public disillusioned by the failure of the 2011 revolt to bring reform, tired of political volatility, and desperate to see their country return to stability and trickle-down economic growth. These Egyptians may be less starry-eyed about Al Sisi’s ability to deliver but see no viable alternative.

“The protesters have nothing to offer. The government will crush them. Sisi is not perfect, but he’s all we have. What we need is stability to turn the economy around. If that means, putting people in jail, so be it,” said a shopkeeper in one of Cairo’s upmarket neighbourhoods.

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/2015/04/egypt-moves-closer-to-labelling-soccer.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

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