

ANALYSIS

What caused the soccer massacre in Egypt?

Monday 13 February 2012, by [MAASS Alan](#), [PETKOV Aaron](#) (Date first published: 7 February 2012).

Alan Maass and Aaron Petkov explain the backdrop to a new eruption of protest against Egypt's military rulers following a massacre at a soccer match in Port Said.

STREET PROTESTS erupted in Cairo and other Egyptian cities over the killing of at least 74 people following a soccer match last week—a massacre that many people believe was orchestrated by the military in another attack on Egypt's revolution.

Demonstrations that began after the February 1 match continued into this week, with authorities escalating the violence against crowds protesting outside the Interior Ministry headquarters near Tahrir Square. The protesters include football fans, known as “ultras,” who blame the military for the killings after the game, but also other groups that are challenging the regime's increasing repression, even as the first anniversary of the downfall of dictator Hosni Mubarak approaches this weekend.

The soccer match was played in the city of Port Said, between the hometown El Masry team and Cairo's popular Al Ahly team. After the game, Masry fans stormed across the field, attacking Ahly players and the Cairo team's ultras. Some of the dead were stabbed or beaten to death—others died in a stampede to get out of the stadium.

Some Masry fans apparently weren't searched, in a breach of standard procedure at Egyptian soccer matches—allowing them to bring knives and other weapons into the stadium. Once the violence began, police stood by and did nothing as the rampage against Ahly ultras took place around them.

Mohammed Aboutrika, a star player for Al Ahly, blamed security forces for the massacre [[1](#)]. “People here are dying, and no one is doing a thing,” he said. “It's like a war. Is life this cheap?”

Ahly ultras are famous for the role they played last February—alongside the White Knights ultras from rival Cairo team Zamalek—in defending Tahrir Square demonstrators against deadly attacks by security forces and out-of-uniform thugs. The ultras have been a presence at demonstrations since to protest the regime's increasing repression and demand an end to the military's rule.

Thus, many people believe the military was complicit in the massacre in Port Said—to take revenge against an organized force that is siding with the revolution against the generals.

The reaction of the regime, led by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), shows another possible motive—to use the killings as an excuse for further repression.

According to reports, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, the head of the SCAF, rushed to the airport to greet Ahly players after they were evacuated from Port Said. There, he declared before the news cameras that the massacre was the work of violent conspirators who were “planning to destabilize Egypt.”

In fact, the killings in Port Said came days after the regime partially lifted the state of emergency left over from Mubarak's reign—but Tantawi has threatened to re-impose it if it was needed to combat what he called "thuggery."

According to Engy Hamdy, a spokesperson for the April 6 Youth Movement: "What happened yesterday does not have an explanation except as part of a plan by the military council and the Interior Ministry to push the country into chaos and force us to embrace military rule." [2]

PROTESTS BEGAN in Cairo on February 2, the day after the match. Ahly ultras went to a train station to meet the injured and the bodies of the dead as they returned from Port Said—and then led a march through the streets to the Interior Ministry. The demonstrators were joined the star player Aboutrika. One account via Twitter [3] said marchers changed the popular chant "The people demand the fall of the regime" to "The demand the execution of the Marshal."

In the following days, the streets surrounding the Interior Ministry headquarters near Tahrir Square once again became the scenes of street battles between security forces and demonstrators.

According to witnesses, in addition to tear gas and rubber bullets, soldiers began firing bird shot at demonstrators to take control of the area. Ahram Online reported [4] that Salma Said, a veteran of the Kefaya movement who became known for her blog posts from Cairo during last year's revolution, was injured while filming the violence around the ministry building, suffering more than 30 pellets to her legs, abdomen and face. As student Mohammed Abdalla described:

"We were on Fahmy Street and the entrance to Bab El-Louq at around 11 p.m. when the CSF [Central Security Forces] truck attacked. I had hidden behind an electric box and was trying to get Salma to join me.

She was shot three times before she had a chance to take cover. First when she tried to hide. Then the truck turned around and shot at her again as she was lying inert on the ground. When we went to rescue her, they shot at all of us for a third time...[The officer shooting from the truck] was not just targeting those on the street, but shooting directly at those on the pavement trying to hide, or those trying to move the injured."

The assault by security forces failed to quell the protests. On the contrary, the fighting had grown more intense by the start of this week.

"Today is really bad, the worst we have seen the last five days," Sherif Hussein, one of the doctors working at a makeshift medical center on the edge of Tahrir Square, told a reporter on Sunday night. "Since 9 p.m., we have seen a lot of rubber pellets wounds to the whole body, as well as unconscious people coming out of tear gas attacks. We've been receiving hundreds of injured."

Earlier in the day, the demonstrators included hundreds of Egyptian women who marched on the parliament building, chanting, "Stop killing our children!" Ahram Online reported that protesters demanded "an immediate ceasefire, the immediate transfer of power from the ruling military council to a civilian government, a radical overhaul of the Interior Ministry, and 'retribution' for victims of the recent violence." [5]

THE MASSACRE in Port Said came almost exactly one year after the Battle of the Camel on February 2—the Mubarak regime's last savage assault against the democracy movement as it gathered force, with mobilizations of between 6 million and 8 million people around the country the day before.

In Cairo, organized groups of thugs converged on Tahrir Square, with goal of breaking the rebellion

at its symbolic heart [6]. As military forces stood by and did nothing, one group riding camels and horses crashed into the square and attacked protesters with swords and clubs. Others threw projectiles and Molotov cocktails from surrounding buildings and bridges.

But Tahrir demonstrators courageously fought back, ultimately using their larger numbers to drive the thugs away.

The ultras of Al Ahly and Zamalek—relying on their years of clashes with security forces—played a central role in the February 2 defense of Tahrir and the subsequent protests that pressured Mubarak to step down.

Though not explicitly political, the ultras have a reputation of opposing the ruling order, especially its police forces. This is particularly of the ultras for Al Ahly, a club formed in 1907 as a means to help build national resistance to British colonial rule (the team name means “the national”). Star Mohamed Aboutrika carried on this anti-colonialist tradition when he famously took off his jersey during a 2008 game to reveal a t-shirt reading “Sympathize with Gaza”—as a protest against Israel’s blockade.

As the Revolutionary Socialists of Egypt explained in a statement following the Port Said massacre, the soccer ultras emerged as a reaction to the dominance of profit-making over every aspect of the game—and to the brutality of security forces at the matches [7]:

“Thus, arose the Egyptian ultras groups, like all movements that originated in Egypt, in response to tyranny and exploitation. It was not a surprise that the ultras groups found their place in the heart of the Egyptian revolution in search of freedom, justice, and that they have made all the sacrifices incurred by the forces of our militant revolution, rejecting the military council’s looting of the revolution and rebuilding of a system of oppression and exploitation.”

The ultras’ battles with the forces of the state date back to before the fall of Mubarak. Ahmed Gafaar, a founder of the White Knights ultras who support Zamalek, told journalist Sherif Tarek [8]:

“If you went to a stadium and saw how some policeman riding a horse could lash ultras members with a whip for no apparent reason, you would understand the nature of the relationship between the police and ultras groups.”

This terrible relationship between both sides is the result of the constant brutality ultras have long been subject to. They do hate the police and would engage with them on every possible occasion, and that’s by far justifiable considering the treatment they have been receiving.

They would step in whenever they see police forces brutalizing people anywhere, whether from their own or not. They would take advantage of their experience in fighting with the [security forces] to stand up against them, and protect the other side.”

That’s exactly what the ultras did during last year’s revolution. Gafaar described their role in the Battle of the Camel to author James Montague months after Mubarak’s downfall: “We are fighting [the police] in every match. We know them. We know when they run, when we should make them run. We were teaching [protesters] how to throw bricks.” [9]

The ultras continued to have a presence in the struggles of the post-Mubarak period. When police attacked a sit-in of around 100 people last November, the ultras returned in force to Tahrir Square as part of the biggest street demonstrations since the revolution. In December, when the security forces planned an attack on the Occupy the Cabinet sit-in—organized after a Mubarak crony was appointed by the SCAF to head the civilian government—soldiers singled out an ultra who they

captured and tortured in order to provoke a confrontation with demonstrators.

EGYPT'S MILITARY rulers have another reason beyond retribution for past battles for their suspected complicity in the killing of Ahly ultras.

The SCAF's latest propaganda emphasizes the threat of "saboteurs" and "plotters" who want to drive Egyptian society into chaos—as a thinly veiled justification for the generals to continue using the iron fist, even as they claim to be abandoning the Mubarak-era state of emergency laws. As author James Dorsey wrote for the mainstream Foreign Policy magazine website, the killings in Port Said "will likely strengthen the hand of those in the ruling military council who want to crack down hard." [10]

Many Western media outlets lumped the massacre together with reports of crime on the rise in Egypt, including several spectacular bank robberies—implying that the real problem was a breakdown in law and order. The *New York Times*, for example, reported, "The riot refocused attention on the failure of the transitional government to reestablish a sense of order and stability in the streets and threatened to provoke a new crisis for Egypt's halting political transition." [11]

But this is exactly why many people in Egypt suspect the military had a hand in the Port Said violence—and perhaps other instances of disorder. "What happened cannot be a coincidence," said Ziad al-Elaimy, a member of parliament from the Egyptian Social Democratic Party. "This massacre and three armed robberies happened only one day after the Interior Minister came to parliament trying to convince us of the importance of maintaining the state of emergency." [12]

Egypt's military rulers have proved that they will stop at nothing to keep their grip on power. The generals are the ones responsible for instigating disorder and violence—not the courageous demonstrators who are challenging their crimes in Cairo and other cities.

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P.S.

* From Socialist Worker USA):

<http://socialistworker.org/2012/02/07/behind-the-soccer-massacre>

Portions of this article appeared first at A Better World Is Probable.

Footnotes

[1] <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/02/calls-to-execute-egypts-military-ruler-echo-on-cai-ros-streets/>

[2] <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/33492/Egypt/Politics-/Port-Said-football-tragedy-deliberate,-says-April-.aspx>

[3] <https://twitter.com/#!/mabushas/status/165070105175265281>

- [4] <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/33849/Egypt/Politics-/One-more-protester-dead-as-Egypt's-security-forces.aspx>
- [5] <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/33792/Egypt/Politics-/Activists-call-for-end-to-bloodshed-as-protesters-.aspx>
- [6] See on ESSF (article 24201), [The regime lashes back](#).
- [7] See on ESSF (article 24218), [In defence of the Ultras: their message and our response – Egyptian Revolutionary Socialists on the football stadium massacre](#).
- [8] <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/114/31904/Egypt/-January-Revolution-continues/Egypt's-Ultras-Politically-involved-but-not-politi.aspx>
- [9] <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/02/20122215833232195.html>
- [10] http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/02/01/ultra_violence
- [11] http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/02/world/middleeast/scores-killed-in-egyptian-soccer-mayhem.html?_r=1
- [12] <http://www.egyptindependent.com/node/632996>