

# How a tragic soccer riot may have revived the Egyptian revolution

Friday 8 June 2012, by [ZIRIN Dave](#) (Date first published: 7 February 2012).

THERE ARE no words for the horror that took place in Port Said, Egypt on February 1. A soccer match became a killing field, with at least seventy-four spectators dead, and as many as 1,000 injured. The visiting Al-Ahly team lost to Al-Masri, and what followed will stain the sport forever. Al-Masri fans rushed the field, attacking the Al-Ahly cheering section after Al-Masri's 3-1 upset victory. People were stabbed and beaten, but the majority of deaths took place because of asphyxiation, as Al-Ahly fans were crushed against locked stadium doors. It was so unspeakably traumatic that beloved Al-Ahly star Mohamed Aboutreika, who famously revealed a "Sympathize with Gaza" shirt during the 2008 Israel bombardment, immediately announced his retirement after the match. A distraught Aboutreika said, "This is not football. This is a war and people are dying in front of us. There is no movement and no security and no ambulances. I call for the league to be canceled. This is a horrible situation, and today can never be forgotten."

This carnage, however, has produced profoundly unexpected results. The shock of Port Said hasn't produced a political coma but instead acted as a defibrillator, bringing a revolutionary impatience back to life. Instead of starting a wave of concern that "lawlessness" was spreading in post-revolutionary Egypt, the anger and sadness seem to be reviving the revolution. The Western media immediately used the shock of the tragedy to call for a crackdown on the hyper-intense fan clubs, the "ultras." As the New York Times wrote, "The deadliest soccer riot anywhere in more than 15 years, it also illuminated the potential for savagery among the organized groups of die-hard fans known here as ultras who have added a volatile element to the street protests since Mr. Mubarak's exit."

Other Western observers, sympathetic to the revolution, feared with good cause that the riots would strengthen the hand of a military dictatorship slow to transfer power to civilian rule. But on the ground, a new reality quickly took shape. This might be news to the Times, but the reaction in Egypt has been rage at the military, fueled by a widespread belief that, either through benign neglect or malignant intent, the authorities let the killings happen.

The witness reports of the Port Said survivors are scandalous. They describe a situation where exits were blocked by military police. The stadium lights were turned off, adding to the sense of panic. Hundreds of riot police can be clearly seen in amateur videos, standing around and doing nothing, as if ordered to remain passive.

Every political sector has spoken out against the military police in Port Said. Abbas Mekhimar, head of the Parliament's defense committee, said, "This is a complete crime. This is part of the scenario of fueling chaos against Egypt." Daa Salah of the Egyptian Football Federation was even more pointed, saying, "The government is getting back at the ultras. They are saying: 'You protest against us, you want democracy and freedom. Here is a taste of your democracy and freedom.'"

The Muslim Brotherhood, which has set itself in opposition to the ultra clubs for much of the year, stated that "the lack of security in the Port Said stadium confirms that there is invisible planning that is behind this unjustified massacre. The authorities have been negligent."

The Revolutionary Socialists of Egypt were more blunt, saying, "The clumsily hatched plot, which could not conceal the shameless complicity of the police, who stood watching the slaughter and killing for hours and did not even attempt to protect the victims, carries only one message to the revolutionaries: the revolution must continue.... The ultras groups that joined the ranks of the revolution early on...are still proving every day that they are an integral part of our revolution."

Chris Toensing, the Editor of Middle East Report, said to me, "Indeed, many Egyptians consider the ultras uncouth. And some may also say that the real revolutionaries are demonstrating peacefully in Tahrir Square, rather than throwing rocks and Molotov Cocktails. But lots of Egyptian activists argue that in 2011—and maybe today as well—the ultras have been key protectors of the revolution, both physically and structurally, in the sense that they keep intense pressure on the state to listen to popular demands."

The people also know that the presumed target of the soccer riot—the Al-Ahly ultras—after being a leading street fighting force during the revolution, have become a leading target of the military. The Al-Ahly ultras wear that target proudly, chanting at games, (I'm told this rhymes in Arabic):

*Oh you MPs  
You turned out to be more rotten than the Police  
Raise the prison walls higher and higher  
Tomorrow the revolution will lay them to waste  
Oh brother, write on the cell wall  
Junta rule is shameful and treasonous  
Down, Down with Junta rule!*

Now not only are many Egyptians coming to the defense of the ultras but, remarkably, ultra groups from opposing clubs have pledged to join forces, seeing the attack on Al-Ahly as an attack on all of them. Their unity was sparked when the Al-Ahly ultras themselves released a statement where they went after not Al-Masry but the military, proclaiming, "They want to punish us and execute us for our participation in the revolution against suppression." The ultras then vowed a "new war in defense of the revolution."

This proved to be more than just words. On Wednesday, February 1, the military leader Tantawi seemed blasé about the anguish, anger, and accusations arising from Port Said, saying, "Egypt is going down the path we planned. We will continue down this path and we will get through this transition."

On Thursday, protests against military inactivity in the Port Said stadium deaths exploded in Cairo, Suez and Port Said itself. The clashes also marked the one year anniversary of the Battle of the Camels, when Mubarak sent armed thugs riding into Tahrir Square on camels and ultras, credited with incredible bravery, had their most shining moment, standing in the camels' charging path and forcing them out of the square.

This year, in Cairo, at least 10,000 protesters marched to the Interior Ministry building near Tahrir Square. The battle that followed according to Health Ministry official Adel Adawi, resulted in 388 protesters' injuries. The flags unfurled were the ultra flags of traditional rivals, Al-Ahly and Zamalek.

But most significant were the thousands of Al-Masry fans who gathered in Port Said, demanding answers from police for their passivity during the stadium violence and why the doors of the stadium were closed.

The reemergence of the ultra clubs as a united force against the military regime should send shivers

from Cairo to Washington, DC. Last year, as one Egyptian activist said to me, "Getting the ultras to work together in Tahrir might have been the toughest part about deposing Mubarak. They really hate each other. They would spit when saying the other club's name." He spoke to me about the need at times to physically force the ultras to stop squabbling and focus on the task of challenging Mubarak.

But after Port Said, it took no effort. An injury to one group of ultras was seen as an injury to all. As James Dorsey, who writes the indispensable blog *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, wrote that the aftermath of Port Said has sparked "a reconciliation among once implacable foes while at the same time solidifying emerging fault lines in Egyptian society."

Throughout the past year, as Dorsey writes, the ultras have fought together on numerous occasions, mostly at anti-military protests, in opposition to the Egyptian Football Association, or against the presence of the Israeli embassy. They bled and even died together even as they became more politically isolated by the military's promise of an orderly and peaceful transfer of power to an elected parliament. Now the Port Said carnage has broken the ultras out of their isolation and raised the question openly about what it will really take to see the military finally out of power. The prospect of united ultras, remarkably, challenges the politics of dead-end gradualism and brings to the forefront the prospect of dramatic change.

Egypt's top player and Zamalek winger Mahmoud Abdel-Razek, also known as Shikabala, said, "Despite the cruelty of what happened in Port Said, this disaster played a role in uniting the fans of all clubs. It might be a turning point in ending intolerance and hatred in Egyptian football. I will go to the Ahly club along with my teammates to offer our condolences to the families of Port Said martyrs. The fans of Ahly are my brothers. I hope Ahly and Zamalek fans can sit together in the stands without barriers."

Al-Ahly midfielder Mohamed Barakat, has also spoken out, refusing to play ever again until there is true "retribution for those that were killed."

There have been continuous efforts to marginalize the ultras. Now they are, unbelievably, on the center stage of history. The ultras have done nothing less than propel the Egyptian Revolution back into the Egyptian streets.

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