

Soccer and Political Protests in MENA Countries

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No study, analysis or history of modern society is complete without a focus on the nexus of sport, society, culture, politics and development. The power of this nexus is nowhere more evident than in soccer – the world’s most global cultural practice. Through their everyday involvement in soccer, people – players, managers and fans – define who they are, as well as who they think others are.

This is particularly true in the Middle East and North Africa. Countries like Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Turkey are positioning themselves as global sport hubs to heighten their diplomatic and economic influence and employ soft power to embed themselves at multiple levels in the international community to enhance their security. Similarly, the revolutionary trans-regional impact of sports is significant; witness the social revolution on the West Bank sparked by the defiance of the Palestinian women’s soccer team in playing, in 2011, visiting Women’s Soccer World Champion Japan in the Territories’ two most conservative cities, Hebron and Nablus, where militant Islamists denounced them as whores.

“The study of sports, and football in particular, arguably the most popular form of cultural performance in Egypt and the rest of the Middle East, has much to add to our current understanding of

the social, political and cultural history of the region,” said historian Shaun Lopez in a journal article in 2009 lamenting the failure of Middle East scholars to include sports in their research.¹ That gap in scholarship is all the more stunning given “the seminal importance of football and other sports in the region or the central role athletics plays in the formation of national identity in most Middle Eastern and North African countries,” Lopez wrote. In fact, the influence of politics on the region’s soccer is so pervasive that it shapes teams formed by Middle Eastern and North African immigrant communities.

Autocratic Fathers

Unlike other regions, such as Latin America, Africa, Europe and Asia, where a significant number of scholars and authors have addressed soccer in its various regional aspects, the Middle East and North Africa has been the subject of only very limited research by a small number of scholars focused on a specific country or territory.

Central to an understanding of the importance of soccer to Middle Eastern autocrats, as well as the pitch’s prominent role as a battlefield for greater freedom, social justice, dignity and national, ethnic, religious and gender rights, is the concept of Palestinian-American scholar Hisham Sharabi in which the autocrat projects himself as a father figure who franchises his authority at different levels of society. In many ways, Sharabi’s concept of neo-patriarchism is rooted in the notion of the

¹ LOPEZ, Shaun. “On Race, Sports and Identity: Picking Up the Ball in Middle East Studies.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, No. 41, p. 359-361, 2009.

mother and father of a nation that harks back to the Arab struggle for independence in the early 20th century and that positioned leaders as the equivalent of parents entitled to raise their children.² Saad Zaghloul, the leader of the nationalist Wafd Party, and a founder of crowned Cairo Soccer Club Al Ahly SC as a bastion of anti-monarchical, republican sentiment, was Egypt's father. His wife Safiyya was the country's mother the year that he was exiled by the British, sparking the 1919 Egyptian revolution.

As a result, like in Franco's Spain, where soccer's mass appeal and a lack of cheap alternative entertainment positioned the beautiful game as a lightning rod for dissent, soccer, for much of the past three decades, constituted the only major battleground that rivalled Islam in the creation of alternative public space in a swath of land stretching from the Gulf to the Atlantic coast of Africa. Away from the glare of the international media, soccer provided a venue to release pent-up anger and frustration and struggle for various rights. By the time the Arab popular uprisings erupted in December 2010, soccer had emerged as a key non-religious, non-governmental institution capable of successfully confronting security force-dominated repressive regimes and militant Islamists. Scholars Eduardo P. Archetti and Amilcar G. Romero asserted already two decades ago that "football does not only reflect society or culture but is part of the way that a society models some of its central existential, political and moral issues."³

Arenas of Agitation and Protest

Soccer stadiums became arenas of political agitation and social protest in soccer-crazy countries like Algeria and Egypt⁴ as repression increased and encompassed not just popular neighbourhoods but stadiums too. "The sport stadia were next to register the heat of social discontent. At

every football match, there were riots and youth demonstrations," wrote Said Chikhi⁵ in his description of a wave of protests that swept Algeria in the late 1980s.

A 2007 diplomatic cable sent by the US embassy in Algiers and disclosed by Wikileaks linked a soccer protest in the desert city of Bou Saada to demonstrations in the western port city of Oran sparked by the publication of a highly contentious list of government housing recipients. The cable warned that "this kind of disturbance has become commonplace, and appears likely to remain so unless the government offers diversions other than soccer and improves the quality of life of its citizens."

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Mass protests in early 2011 initially suggested that Algeria would join the first wave of Arab nations whose leaders had been toppled. The government quelled the unrest by hiking salaries and social spending on the back of its oil and gas revenues, which have enabled it to build up foreign reserves in excess of \$186 billion. The government also benefited from the fact that many Algerians, who vividly recall the violence of the 1990s that left some 100,000 people dead, have become cautious because of the chaos in post-Gaddafi Libya and the civil war in Syria.

As a result, a tacit understanding emerged between Algerian soccer fans and security forces that football supporters could express their grievances as long as

² BARON, Beth. *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender and Politics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

³ ARCHETTI, Eduardo P. & ROMERO, AMILCAR G. "Death and Violence in Argentinian football" in: GIULIANOTTI, Richard, BONNEY, Norman & HEPWORTH, Mike (eds.). *Football, Violence and Social Identity*. Abingdon OX: Routledge, 1991.

⁴ BESHEER, Mohamed Gamal. *Kitab al-Ultras* (The Ultras Book). Cairo: Dar Diwan, 2011.

⁵ CHIKHI, Said. "The worker, the prince and the fact of life: The mirage of modernity in Algeria," in: EL-KENZ, Ali (ed.). *The Challenge of Modernity*. London: Codesria, 1991.

they did so within the confines of the stadiums. An upsurge in soccer-related violence in Algeria in late 2012 serves, however, as a warning that frustration is mounting with the failure of the country's gerontocracy, in control since independence, to share power with a younger generation, create jobs and address housing problems.

A High-Stakes Political Cat-and-Mouse Contest

Attempts by autocratic leaders to employ soccer to improve their tarnished images and detract attention from unpopular policies turned soccer into a high-stakes political cat-and-mouse contest between fans and autocrats and Islamists for control of the pitch and a counterbalance to jihadi employment of soccer as a bonding and recruitment tool. All participants in the game banked on the fact that only soccer could capture the deep-seated emotion, passion and commitment evoked by Islam among a majority of the population in the Middle East and North Africa.

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Soccer fans foreshadowed what may be the most fundamental change underlying the popular revolts against autocratic rule in a swath of land stretching from the Atlantic coast of Africa to the Gulf: a mental shift from subservience and acceptance of the autocratic father to an unprecedented mentality of decid-

ing for oneself and questioning and challenging of authority. It is a shift across the political and social spectrum: liberals resisting religious precepts, children questioning their parents, and young Islamists challenging their ideological elders. "These things take time and they are done through conflict, trouble and confrontation and then they unfold," said Egyptian author, activist and writer Ezzedine Choukri-Fishere.⁶

Often militant, highly politicised, violence-prone soccer fans or ultras shifted their protests from the stadium to the square as a result of the suspension of professional soccer in countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Algeria. They frequently played a unique role in helping protesters seeking to rid themselves of the yoke of repressive rule, economic mismanagement and corruption to break through the barrier of fear erected by neo-patriarchal autocrats that had condemned them to silence and passivity until then.⁷

The Perfect Playground

For neo-patriarchal regimes, soccer was the perfect playground. Dictatorial regimes were not simply superimposed on societies gasping for freedom. Arab autocracies may have lacked popular support and credibility, but the repressive reflexes that created barriers of fear were internalised and reproduced at virtually every layer of society. As a result, societal resistance to, as well as fear of, change contributed to their sustainability.

The patriarchal values that dominate soccer, in addition to its popularity, made it the perfect game for neo-patriarchs. Their values reinforced society's cultural patriarchy as well as soccer's values: assertion of male superiority in most aspects of life, control or harnessing of female lust and a belief in a masculine God. The protesters, despite their revolutionary spirit, were nevertheless often unable or unwilling to completely shake off the patriarchal values they had internalised. That failure complicated their struggle to not only topple the autocratic father figure but also destroy the regime he had

⁶ NURTSCH, Ceyda. "Interview with Ezzedine Choukri Fishere: The Arab Revolution Is a Cultural Revolution." *Qantara*, 21 February 2013, http://en.qantara.de/wcsite.php?wc_c=20712&wc_id=22899.

⁷ WHITAKER, Brian. *What's Really Wrong with the Middle East*. London: Saqi Books, 2009.

established, as manifested, for example, in the street clashes near Cairo's Tahrir Square in November 2011 during protests demanding an end to the Egyptian military's rule. "The worst and the most damaging form of the persistence of the ancien regime is when it persists in the very lives, behaviour, habits and decisions of the revolutionaries themselves," said prominent Syrian intellectual Sadik Al Azm.⁸

Contentious Street or Electoral Politics?

In breaking through the neo-patriarchal barriers of fear, militant soccer fans extended across the Middle East and North Africa a tradition of close association between soccer and politics that is still evident today in derbies in Amman, Tehran, Riyadh and Cairo, home to the world's most violent encounter on the pitch.

In post-revolt Middle Eastern nations like Egypt, elected governments and militant soccer fans who played key roles in the toppling of autocrats are struggling with the transition from contentious street to electoral politics. The ultras, one of Egypt's largest civic groups after the ruling Muslim Brotherhood, face the tough decision, two years after the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak and more than a year after 74 fans died in a politically loaded soccer brawl in the Suez Canal city of Port

Said, of whether and when to surrender the power of the street.

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That decision is increasingly dependent on the government's ability to demonstrate seriousness in achieving their successful revolt's goal. So far, the government's failure to reform police and security forces, the country's most despised institutions because of their role as enforcers of the Mubarak-era repression, and hold law enforcement officials accountable for the deaths of more than 200 protesters in the last two years has undermined confidence in it. As a result, Egyptian stadiums remain flashpoints as the country teeters on the brink of economic and political failure.

Further reading

The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com>

⁸ AL AZM, Sadik. "Arab Nationalism, Islamism and the Arab Uprising," lecture at the London School of Economics and Political Science, London, 30 November 2011, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2011/12/07/arab-nationalism-islamism-and-the-arab-uprising/>.