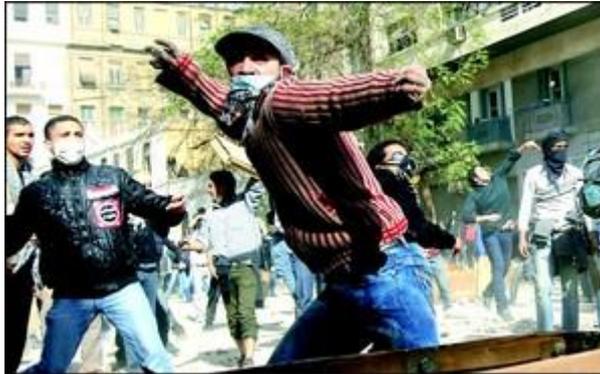


Unfinished business on the streets of Cairo

Sunday Business Post, 5 February 2012 by David Lynch



Egyptian protesters clash with riot police in front of the Ministry of the Interior in Cairo last Friday. Photo: Getty

Cairo is tense this weekend as grieving and angry football fans spill onto its streets. Bloody clashes between the organised supporter groups - Ultras - and the police are expected to continue into the coming week. Hundreds were reported injured in recent days after running battles on the streets around Tahrir Square.

Even by the standards of this tumultuous year, the death of more than 70 football fans in Port Said last Wednesday night has left the Egyptian capital edgy. The facts of what occurred in Port Said are disputed, and a government investigation has been launched.

However, some core details are clear. Cairo giants Al-Ahly brought a large travelling support to an away game against Al-Masry in Port Said. Some home 'fans' were apparently allowed to enter the stadium carrying weapons.

On the final whistle of a shock defeat for Al-Ahly, hundreds of Masry fans spilled onto the pitch and attacked opposition players and supporters. Security forces did little or nothing to prevent this. Outnumbered, the Ahly fans attempted to flee, but gates were shut. Fans reportedly died from being stabbed and crushed.

Violence is not unknown at Egyptian soccer games, but not on this scale. I have attended league games that were peaceful but with extensive security. Local fans were happy to see foreigners, eager to talk the international language of football. Some Egyptians will regard Port Said as the horrific consequences of lawless football hooliganism.

But in Cairo, that is most certainly not how many people view it. The Ahly Ultras blame the police, and even accuse them of coordinating the assault. This accusation is supported by the Muslim Brotherhood and others, who accuse elements in the police force of being still loyal to the former dictator Hosni Mubarak.

The truth is difficult to ascertain - the Port Said security chief and head of police investigations has been detained and there have been resignations in the football association. But almost the more important question is - why do many Egyptians blame 'forces against the revolution' for what happened in Port Said?

To understand this, we must assess the role the Ultras have played in Egypt's revolutionary year. Anyone who has witnessed the Ultras 'in action' both inside and outside the stadium can testify that it's a complex phenomenon.

For someone more accustomed to fan culture in these islands, a trip to an Al-Ahly home game can be a mesmerising and exotic experience. Unlike soccer fans in Dalymount Park or Anfield for instance, the colourful Ultra fans often appear more interested in incessantly singing and bouncing, than in what is happening on the pitch. The Al-Ahly fans' extensive songbook is chanted throughout the 90 minutes, brilliantly coordinated by fans acting as conductors. The deafening singing stops for nothing - even goals.

It's clearly an organised, enjoyable experience for thousands of young men, who are attracted to the comradeship and excitement - a welcome break from a daily life of economic crisis and high youth unemployment. But once they step out of the stadium, the Ultras abandon the collective singing and throw themselves into street fighting and revolutionary politics.

During the January 2011 revolution, members of the Ultra groups associated with Al-Ahly, and their bitter Cairo rivals Zamalek, played a leading role in the street battles. In hindsight, this is not surprising. Under former president Hosni Mubarak, almost every potential point of organised resistance to his power was crushed or incorporated. The religious leadership, the national media and the labour movement had all been compromised in the eyes of the revolutionary youth who took to the streets in early 2011.

But the Ultras were different - highly organised, a history of antagonism with the police, and often battle-hardened, it was clear that they were independent.

In the months since the revolution, the Ultras have been at the forefront of clashes with security forces. Members have died and their hatred towards the police is intense and mutual.

Like the rest of the revolutionary movement, the Ultras want the police force disbanded and reorganised. They express this, not in elaborate political statements, but by repeatedly laying siege to the Ministry of Interior building in downtown Cairo, the headquarters of the security forces.

They may be street-fighting heroes to some, but there are others in Egypt who are not so keen.

"You see this, you these crazy football supporters?" said the manager of a small shop in Dokki, Cairo, pointing at his TV showing clashes near Tahrir Square the night after the Port Said tragedy. "What do they want? This city to burn?"

To some Egyptians, the Ultras symbolise a general drift towards lawlessness in the country. Since the revolution, the police have not been fully redeployed onto the streets of Cairo. Locals speak warily about a sharp increase in crime, although this is difficult to verify independently.

Whatever the truth about the events in Port Said, two broad political narratives are generally clear. First, in the eyes of the Ultras and revolutionary youth, what happened a year ago was a revolt

against the corrupt police state. But, while Mubarak was forced from power, the apparatus of the police state and the Ministry of the Interior remains in place.

In recent months, there has been intense discussion in the broad revolutionary movement. Many now regard the decision to leave Tahrir Square following Mubarak's departure last February as a crucial mistake. Most think they should have stayed until the ruling structures of the old system were completely dismantled.

For this group, of which the Ultras are part, the revolution remains unfinished. The continued existence of the old security forces is - to them - an unpalatable reminder of this.

Clashes are therefore inevitable and what happened in Port Said and after is part of this vicious lingering antagonism.

Many of the newly-elected politicians, who spoke in Egypt's People Assembly last week, understand this. There is also a growing realisation that the police service must be purged and reformed to gain legitimacy.

But any attempt at purging and reformation will be resisted. There are powerful counter-revolutionary forces still at work in Cairo, strong vested interests who do not want more change. Revolutionaries believe much of this interest is concentrated in the Ministry of the Interior and police force.

Whether such resistance is coordinated by Mubarak and his sons directly from prison (which some revolutionaries actually believe) is debatable. Egyptian political discourse often involves questionable conspiracy talk of "invisible hands" and "foreign influence". It must also be remembered that vicious violence has occurred at football matches worldwide - not always politically manipulated. But, despite this, suspicions that the security forces played a role in the events in Port Said are not unwarranted.

What is indisputable is that there are many who want the new parliament to succeed, for a real democratic constitution to be passed, a fair presidential election to be held, for Mubarak and his sons to face justice and for crimes carried out by the security forces to be investigated. But there are others, who were vital cogs in the old regime, who still have much to lose in such a scenario.

These are the battle lines, revolution and counter-revolution, and the events in Port Said are perceived by many Egyptians as part of this struggle.

David Lynch is based in Cairo. His second book is A Divided Paradise: An Irishman in the Holy Land" (New Island, 2009). He blogs at www.arabspringinmystep.com