Ultras in Egypt: state, revolution, and the power of public space

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Abstract

In this article, I explore the relationship between organized soccer fans—Ultras—and the Egyptian state. I argue that Ultra groups became politicized as they sought autonomy in public space, but faced resistance from Egyptian security forces. To make this argument, I trace the history of Ultra groups. I show how Ultras made relatively few political statements in the first years after their 2007 inception. However, these groups become increasingly politicized in reaction to police harassment. This harassment was motivated by the fact that Ultras subverted state control over public spaces. The events of the 2011 Arab Spring further politicized the Ultras and transformed them into revolutionary actors by giving them the opportunity to delegitimize the authoritarian state's entire presence in public space. However, the greater public visibility of Ultras came at a cost, partially fracturing Ultra groups and giving state forces a desire for retaliation that was realized in the Port Said massacre. Despite these challenges, Ultra groups have continued to seek autonomy in public spaces, protesting authoritarian tendencies in the post-Mubarak era. I conclude with an afterward, explaining how Ultras not only defy authoritarianism in Egypt, but also dominant narratives about Egyptian society.

Introduction

In Hosni Mubarak's Egypt, several forces within the state competed for power and privileges against other state actors such as the military and the surveillance agency (Amar 2011). However, in everyday life, most Egyptians interacted with Mubarak's state via the police in public space. Indeed, the police apparatus controlled public spaces and expressions throughout Egypt. Even basic expressions of dissent were illegal under Mubarak's rule (Perkins 2010) and, to an extent, have remained so even after the revolutionary upheavals of 2011. As police suppressed dissent through verbal and physical harassment, fear and humiliation pervaded public spaces (Ismail 2012; Winegar 2012). The seemingly apolitical realm of public space was managed and controlled to retain the legitimacy of Mubarak's state apparatus. But all actors within Egyptian society did not acquiesce to these authoritarian mechanisms. In an unexpected fashion, sport and politics coalesced as organized soccer fans—Ultras—contested police control over civic expressions. In this article, I explore the role of these Ultras

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before, during, and after the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, with a particular focus on their relation to the state via public space.

I argue that Ultra groups became increasingly politicized as they sought autonomy and visibility in public space, but faced opposition to this autonomy from state mechanisms both during and after Mubarak's regime. Before the Egyptian Revolution, Ultra members made relatively few political statements. However, these groups became politicized through confrontations with the police, the state's chief representatives in the public arena. The Egyptian Revolution deepened Ultras' political involvement, giving these groups the ambition and opportunity to confront the authoritarian state's entire presence in the public sphere. In the post-revolutionary context, many Ultra members continued to seek civic autonomy by opposing the authoritarian tendencies of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) and President Mohamed Morsi. However, Ultra groups have had difficulty maintaining unity in this context due to their growing popularity and controversies surrounding the Port Said massacre. In the end, Egypt's Ultras defy dominant narratives implied by both the Western media and Egyptian leaders. They therefore enable us, as observers, to perceive the rich possibilities and unexpected political subjectivities that can emerge in democratic movements.

Ultras under Mubarak

Soccer has a long history in Egypt, having first appeared in 1882 when British soldiers organized matches with their Egyptian counterparts ("History of the Egyptian football game," n.d.). However, Ultra groups emerged very recently in the country. Even though most Ultras in Egypt were not explicitly political in the 2000s, they became politicized to the extent that they sought social autonomy, but experienced pushback from Mubarak and police forces. Ultras challenged these authoritarian mechanisms while sharing an ethos of resistance and cultivating a strong sense of collectivity.

The Egyptian Ultras movement began in 2005. It stated via the Internet, as a network of soccer fan forums (Shawky 2012). Leaders converted these virtual groups into full-fledged Ultra organizations in 2007, inspired by the Ultra clubs of Italy. However, the political tendencies of the two movements vary considerably because Italian Ultras generally have rightist tendencies whereas Egyptian Ultras have anti-authoritarian leanings (Dunmore 2007). Indeed, Egypt's Ultras do not conform to sporting culture around the world, which is generally either apolitical or conservative (Mustafa 2013). Notwithstanding these differences, European and Egyptian Ultras share an ethos of intentional commitment directed towards their respective clubs. Ultras from both regions also exert a powerful physical presence at matches, an enthusiasm that sometimes spills over into small-scale brawls between rival fans (Kuhn 2011).

Ultras Ahlawy and Ultras White Knights were among the first Ultra groups in Egypt and later become the two largest and most visible Ultra organizations (Dunmore 2007; Mazhar 2009). Soccer enthusiasts founded Ultras Ahlawy to

support Cairo-based Club Ah-Ahly, while other fans formed Ultras White Knights to support Giza-based Club Zamalek, the second most successful Egyptian team after Club Ah-Ahly. Historically, Club Ah-Ahly and Club Zamalek have had a heated rivalry, a friction that still endures between Ultras White Knights and Ultras Ahlawy. This rivalry demonstrates how Ultras support different teams and, as a result, do not comprise a homogenous group. Indeed, from their 2007 inception onwards, Ultras occasionally engaged in fistfights with rival Ultras over game results, fomenting early hostilities between groups (Dorsey 2008).

Despite divisions and rivalries between Ultras, these groups nevertheless have similar attitudes, tactics, and motivations. For example, Ultra leaders founded their organizations in reaction against the perceived feebleness of other fan clubs. According to these founders, other fan clubs were more concerned about gaining prestige from talking with players or the media than supporting their teams (Dorsey 2008). In turn, Ultra leaders hoped to avoid the alleged vanity of these fan clubs by cultivating selflessness and group enthusiasm among Ultras (Dorsey 2008). In addition, Ultra founders and members also resented the commercialization of soccer, which, according to them, betrayed average fans and the original spirit of soccer (Dunmore 2007). Consequently, an early tension emerged between Ultra groups and the management of their respective clubs. For example, Club Ah-Ahly has retained a distance towards Ultras Ahlawy, refusing Ultra requests to use Cairo International Stadium to prepare for choreography displays (Dunmore 2007). And, just as clubs can be suspicious of Ultra groups, Ultras remain distrustful of club management: Ultra groups have regularly opposed increases in ticket prices and the monopolization of soccer broadcasts (Colla, Gumbiner, and Abouali 2012; Mazhar 2009). In this way, Ultra members resent the commercialization of profit-seeking soccer clubs even as they simultaneously remain committed to an idealized identity of their teams. Ultras thus share a sense of intentional commitment to team identity that is defined in opposition to profit-seeking clubs and less committed fans.

While Ultras oppose soccer commercialization and the perceived laxness of other fans, team pride unites members from diverse backgrounds, transcending (but not always excluding) ethnicity, religion, and regional identity. Mohamed Gamal Beshir (2012), an expert on the Egyptian Ultras and himself a (covert) Ultra leader, describes how Ultras instill such pride in young men. Poetically, he writes how

> Your eyes cannot miss an ultra, whether inside or outside the stadium. By nature, he is proud, aware of his importance among the rest of his people who respect him for his capabilities. He walks with his head up high…doesn't talk much…and he never befriends fans of other football teams. (quoted in Shawky 2012)

In this passage, Beshir depicts how Ultra members gain pride from discipline, team commitment, and the collective nature of their Ultra groups. As we will later see, this collective pride, in the context of Mubarak's authoritarianism,

forged a subversive form of political agency and subjectivity that disturbed state control over public space.

While the collective pride of Ultra groups is evident, the class character of Ultras remains a more complex issue. Indeed, arriving at definitive conclusions regarding Ultras' class character is particularly difficult given the secrecy of Ultra groups. Nevertheless, some trends are discernable. For example, commentators such as Rabab El-Mahdi (2012) downplay class distinctions within Ultras groups, claiming that they are often cross-class organizations. For El-Mahdi, these organizations unify the educated and illiterate, the rich and poor, arguing that no single class or educational trait unifies Ultra members. While El-Mahdi is right to claim that no single characteristic unites all members, Ultra groups may reflect some class divisions. For example, according to Amr Kamal, an Egyptian sports critic, Ultra leaders generally tend to be well educated and come from upper middle class families (Mazhar 2009). These leaders are familiar with Ultra groups in Europe and have modeled Egyptian Ultras from these groups. Broadly speaking, then, Ultra groups contain members from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, but leaders tend to be better-educated than other members.

Although these class distinctions sometimes exist, they do not generally influence the central attitudes of Ultra groups, which consistently cultivate a class-conscious ethos of resistance. For instance, Ultras occupy the seats directly behind the goalkeeper—the cheapest tickets available—to enable the widest attendance possible (Solayman 2012). Moreover, as one Ahlawy leader known as Assad stated in an interview,

> Soccer is bigger than politics. It's about escapism. The average Ahly fan is a guy who lives in a one bedroom flat with his wife, mother-in-law, and five kids. He is paid minimum wage and his life sucks. The only good thing about his life is that for two hours on a Friday he goes to the stadium and watches Ahly. People suffer, but when Ahly wins they smile. (Dorsey 2012a)

Here, the working class dimension of soccer enthusiasm is apparent: Ultra groups bring together young and sometimes underprivileged men into disciplined organizations, giving these youths an opportunity to form community ties through soccer. These ties are further strengthened by police harassment (Tarek 2012), which bonds Ultra members by reinforcing their ethos of collective resistance. In this way, class differences between members do not seem to fragment Ultras' central attitudes: Ultras consistently embody an ethos of resistance even though these organizations include members from diverse educational and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Although Ultra groups have a consistent set of central attitudes, individual fans may perceive their Ultra membership in various ways. For example, some members define their participations with reference to anarchism, claiming that they joined Ultra groups to become involved in clashes with police. On the

whole, these members may tend to be better-educated and are familiar with European anarchists (Lindsey 2011). In contrast, other members cite soccer as the primary reason they joined Ultra groups (Tarek 2012). However, because team affinity unites Ultra members across ideological lines, these tendencies are two among many. Indeed, team pride limits the influence of any one ideology and supports the unity of Ultra groups despite members' socioeconomic, educational, and ideological differences. Also, as one Ultra member stated,

> There are no leaders among us — but there are organizational individuals who manage meetings and help guide the younger members. There is no hierarchy — organizers within the group are simply people with wisdom; as long as you have expertise in something, or a realistic idea, and, most importantly, a strong sense of humanity. (El-Nabawi 2012)

Accordingly, Ultra leaders advocate for horizontal structures that further limit the influence of any single ideology, balancing groups' central attitudes and members' diverse beliefs. In practice, Ultras groups are not perfectly horizontal, but combine elements of centralized and decentralized leadership. For instance, Ultra groups have centralized leadership committees that coordinate with regional subgroups through meetings with local representatives (Mustafa 2013). Indeed, it is easy to underestimate the sophistication of Ultras' organizational structures because members remain secretive. However, despite this qualification, Ultras' quasi-horizontal structures do help reinforce group attitudes and soften divisive issues among members with diverse ideological leanings.

Because Ultra groups united enthusiastic members, they quickly gained influence in the world of Egyptian soccer. For example, Ultras Ahlawy had only about 55 members during its first year, but the group prided itself on its selectivity and the large effects it could make with small numbers (Dunmore 2007). To generate large effects, Ultras Ahlawy members performed choreographed dances in stadiums during games, recited chants, and displayed tifos (banners). These tifos were large—50 by 30 feet—and often contained inspirational messages (Dunmore 2007). Tifos later commemorated Ultra members who died in clashes with police and indirectly carried political messages such as "We Are Egypt" (Dunmore 2007). Taken together, these various tactics gave Ultra groups a powerful physical presence in stadiums and public squares across Egypt, since, as mentioned above, some Ultra organizations have braches situated in cities spread throughout the country (Mustafa 2013). Ultras' organizational structures helped Ultras create such effects by giving eager members opportunities to organize events under the coordination of centralized leaders.

Although Ultras focused on coordinating fan spectacles prior to 2011, some members occasionally made statements on political issues. For instance, several White Knight members made controversial remarks about Palestine, the

Egyptian state, and the stagnant economy prior to the Revolution, leading to several arrests (Totah 2012). Also, a 2009 soccer riot foreshadowed Ultras' later politicization in the Egyptian Revolution. In this incident, Egyptian soccer fans attacked the Algerian national team bus and the Algerian embassy. While it is unclear how many Ultra members participated in this riot, the police confrontations prefigured those of the Egyptian Revolution. Media analysts reported that the violence, although tied to a soccer rivalry, stemmed in part from resentment against political repression and high levels of unemployment (Montague 2012a). Still, it is important to avoid overemphasizing the political involvement of Ultra members in the years prior to the Egyptian Revolution. Indeed, Ultra members who made political statements prior to 2011 did so largely as individuals, not as group representatives.

Furthermore, during this tenure, Mubarak attempted to manipulate soccer enthusiasm to legitimize his regime, complicating the political dimension of Ultra organizations. Indeed, Mubarak used soccer spectacles to appeal to Egyptians and divert attention from his regime's negative effects (Panja and El-Tablawy 2012). He also often met with players of the Egyptian National Team and made congratulatory remarks after notable matches ("Mubarak receives," 2010). And, in 2006, Mubarak's son, Gamal, even talked at the National Democratic Party (NDP) Conference about promoting Egyptian soccer (Slackman and El-Naggar, 2006). These actions show how Mubarak sought to distract young men from political issues by focusing their attention on soccer.

However, even though Ultras made relatively few political statements prior to 2011 and Mubarak attempted to manipulate soccer enthusiasm, the social character of Ultra organizations made them, in a way, inherently political. That is, Ultras remained autonomous organizations, creating politically charged graffiti and planning independent choreographies, performances, and demonstrations. In these acts, Ultras asserted group autonomy in public space, a fact that challenged the control of the state in these spaces.

By seeking autonomy in public spaces and stadiums, Ultra members reacted against the fear and humiliation that characterized everyday life under Mubarak. As Ismail (2012) has noted, in Egypt's authoritarian context, the police disciplined citizens in public space through extensive surveillance, physical intimidation, and degrading verbal abuse. Thus, according to Ismail, ordinary Egyptians felt humiliation in everyday encounters with the police, which, for them, came to represent the repressive state. However, by asserting autonomy and group pride, Ultra organizations interrupted this pattern of humiliation. As one Ultra explained, "The whole concept of any independent organization didn't exist, not unions, not political parties [*sic*]. Then we started to organize football ultras...to them [the police] it was the youth, in big numbers—very smart people—who could mobilize themselves quickly" (Montague 2012c). To give Ultras such autonomy against Mubarak's state, these groups relied on self-funding. For example, Ultra groups have designed t-shirts, mugs, flags, medals, and others products to raise money and eliminate the need for powerful state patrons (but, in the process, contributing to the very

commercialization that these groups have, at times, resented; Solayman 2012).
In general, then, Ultra members made relatively few political statements prior
to 2011, but these organizations became subversive insofar they sought social
autonomy and rejected the culture of humiliation that characterized the public
sphere under Mubarak. In this way, Ultras "politics of fun" subverted Mubarak's
state and its police apparatus (El-Sherif 2012).

Because Ultras asserted autonomy in public stadiums and squares, state forces
reacted violently against these groups in an effort to limit their visibility and
notoriety. Indeed, police forces confronted Ultra organizations even when these
groups were young and relatively marginal (Dunmore 2007) because they
nevertheless threatened the control of the police in civic space. As Ultras gained
popularity, police repression further increased. For example, starting in 2008
and increasing in 2009, police began confiscating Ultra banners, megaphones,
and flares at stadium entrances (which some Ultra members would smuggle in
anyway; Mazhar 2009). The police also began arresting Ultra members the day
before or after notable matches (Mazhar 2009). When Ultra members did voice
clear political positions, police forces quickly suppressed them, illustrating how
Ultras' visibility in the public sphere made state forces especially sensitive to
their political remarks. For example, after White Knight members demonstrated
in memory of the second Palestinian Intifada, police arrested these members
and held them for several days (El-Wardani 2011). Contrary to police intentions,
however, this intensifying harassment further politicized Ultras organizations,
which began to identity resistance against the police as a key component of
Ultra character. Indeed, police aggravation unified Ultras under the collective
slogan, "A.C.A.B" ("All Cops Are Bastards"), forging links and solidarity between
rival Ultras (Totah 2012). Harassment from the state deepened Ultras' political
involvement by provoking resentment and giving diverse Ultra organizations a
common enemy—the security forces. During Mubarak's tenure, in other words,
police repression and Ultras' activism formed a self-reinforcing cycle.

For these factors, Egypt's Ultras had a subversive edge before the Egyptian
Revolution. As they combined organizational unity, team enthusiasm, and an
ethic of rebellion, Ultras challenged the supremacy of the authoritarian state in
public spaces. They sought social autonomy and, as a result, became
increasingly antagonistic with security forces. But, as we shall see, the Egyptian
Revolution transformed aspects of the Ultras, further politicizing these groups
and giving members the opportunity to challenge the existence of the
authoritarian state itself.

From subversive to revolutionary

Uprisings in Tunisia provided the spark for the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. Much
media and scholarly attention has focused on the role of middle class youths and
social networking technologies in the Revolution (Aitamurto 2011; Howard and
Hussain 2011). Fewer commentators noted the crucial but unexpected role of
Ultra groups. Indeed, Ultra groups became a surprisingly central protagonist in

the Egyptian Revolution by bringing their organizational unity, fighting experience, and rebellious ethos to demonstrations. As they played a central role in the Revolution, Ultras became increasingly politicized, seeking to eliminate the presence of the authoritarian state in public space through large-scale demonstrations. After all, as Egyptian blogger Alla Abd El Fattah stated in a 2011 interview, "The Ultras have played a more significant role" in the Egyptian Revolution "than any political group on the ground" (Zirin 2012b).

From the beginning of the Egyptian Revolution, Ultra members supported demonstrators on Tahrir Square and around Egypt, safeguarding protesters and clashing with security forces. For instance, an anonymous video uploaded to YouTube on January 22nd reassured Egyptians who intended to join the first protests on the 25th (Shawky 2012). The video encouraged Egyptians who might have feared the police presence by noting that Ultra members would be in attendance to protect protesters. And, true to this promise, Ultras did join protesters on the January 25th demonstrations. During these early demonstrations, Ultra groups appeared most prominently on Wasr Al-Aini Street (El-Wardani 2011). Shortly after these first protests, Ultra members expanded their reach in the Bulaq, Guiza, and Shubra neighborhoods (El-Wardani 2011). The first member killed in the Revolution died in Alexandria on January 28th. The second member killed, Mohamad Makwa, died in Suez, later on the 28th (El-Wardani 2011).

Originally, Ultra members joined the 2011 demonstrators as private individuals, meeting randomly on Tahrir Square and in similar squares throughout Egypt. As one participant stated,

> Most of our guys met randomly in Tahrir Square after fighting with police on the first day. And the next day, after we'd all been forced out, we got together with some Ultras from another team, attacking the police just to tire them out. Two days later we took the square back for good. And we fought in the 'Camel Battle' the next week. (Dorsey 2012b)

After police brutality increased following initial demonstrations, most Ultras decided to join protesters (El-Sherif 2012): rival Ultra groups came together to act towards the common objective of dismantling Mubarak's repressive regime. This type of collective action is rare in Ultras' history. As Beshir, stated in an interview,

> It's safe to say that 80% of the Egyptian population doesn't know anything about politics, and the same goes for the Ultras. The Ultras stand out because they are a sizable group, but they are not really unified when it comes to politics. Some members might be from all across the political spectrum, others are completely apathetic. Some participate in demos [demonstrations], others don't...They only appear as one body when they all agree on one thing, which happens very seldom. (Tarek 2012)

Thus, the Egyptian Revolution became one of the few instances where competing Ultra groups took some form of collective action, bolstering demonstrations in public squares around Egypt.

After they agreed to join demonstrations, Ultras helped immobilize police and security forces through their organizational unity and resistance tactics. As soccer writer David Levy noted, Ultras confronted security forces with tactical specializations that enabled them to resist the well-equipped security forces (Dorsey 2011). Ultra groups assigned rock hurlers, formed crews to find projectiles, and also designated some members to turn over and torch vehicles to create defensive structures ("Cyclones of Struggle," 2011). These tactical specializations enabled Ultra members to weaken security forces in strategic and coordinated fighting. Ultra groups also mastered attack and defense tactics to minimize losses while sustaining active resistance against security forces (El-Sherif 2012). Indeed, as discussed earlier, Ultras are sophisticated organizations that rely on partly centralized, partly decentralized structures. This quasi-horizontal arrangement gave Ultras a combination of group unity and strategic flexibility during clashes with state forces.

Examining one of the Ultras' first collective actions can highlight the dynamics of their protest tactics. Ultras came together for the Friday of Rage demonstrations on January 28th. In the hours prior to this demonstration, Mubarak had severed Internet access across Egypt and continued to defy protesters' demands for him to resign (El-Amrani 2011). To prepare for demonstrations, Ultra members led twenty smaller groups of front-line activists to Tahrir Square. Ultra leaders guided these units separately to avoid being noticed before arriving. According to one participant, "On our own, it was nothing. But together as a group in the Square we were a big power… 10,000-15,000 people fighting without any fear. The Ultras were the leaders of the battle" (Montague 2011). These Ultra-led groups converged on Tahrir Square, using specialized crews to resist the well-equipped security forces and confront these forces with coordinated strategies.

Indeed, Ultras played a key role in the revolution not only because of their strong organizational structures, but also because they had experience challenging police forces through coordinated fighting—skills that few other protesters possessed. After all, in 2011, some Egyptians were protesting for the first time. Also, while other demonstrators were affiliated with organizations such as the April 6 Youth Movement and had experienced police brutality in prior demonstrations, Ultras had more knowledge about confronting the police with active methods (Hassan 2010). Accordingly, Ultras played a crucial role in the Egyptian Revolution particularly because of their experience resisting the police, a skill that few other groups in Egypt possessed.

However, Ultras contributed more than their group unity and experience fighting the police to the demonstrations of the Egyptian Revolution. Indeed, as El-Sherif (2012) outlined, Ultras contributed at least six intangible qualities to demonstrations. For El-Sherif, Ultras added dynamism, flexibility, positivity, a refusal of traditionalism, a group mentality, and a rebellious attitude to the

Revolution. Taken together, these intangible characteristics helped infuse protesters with the motivation and enthusiasm necessary to participate in dangerous police clashes.

According to El-Sherif, Ultras' resilient dynamism originated from the intense, emotional attachments Ultra members have to their teams. Indeed, Ultra members aim to support their teams in the face of both victory and defeat. Second, Ultras' horizontal flexibility enabled them to maintain active resistance while minimizing losses and avoiding infighting between members. Third, Ultras' positivity infused demonstrations with energy and enthusiasm in clashes with police forces. Underlying this positive attitude was Ultras' experience cheering their teams. Fourth, Ultras defy social and cultural norms. They regularly criticize the traditional policies of clubs and reject cultural standards viewed as oppressive. For example, Ultras have fought rules on obscene language and restrictions on the attendance of women at matches (El-Sherif 2012). Fifth, the group mentality of Ultras gave them legitimacy in clashes with the security forces. Ultra members and leaders remain anonymous, ensuring that Ultras act as collective units and not for one leader's profit. Lastly, Ultras' spirit of rebellion helped mobilize protesters during police clashes. Bringing these six characteristics, Ultras' soccer experiences shaped their political subjectivities and, in the 2011 protests, helped Ultras galvanize other demonstrators.

While Ultras contributed these intangible factors, the Egyptian Revolution influenced Ultra groups by increasing their explicitly political nature. As explained earlier, individual Ultra members would sometimes make political statements prior to the Revolution. Also, the autonomous character of Ultra groups made them inherently subversive in the context of Mubarak's authoritarianism. Yet during the Egyptian Revolution, Ultra groups took more direct political positions.

For example, before the Revolution, Ultra chants were often about soccer. During and after the Revolution, however, these chants became openly political. Ultra chants honored members who died in police confrontations (Dale 2012), condemned the security forces, and criticized leading political and military figures (Lindsey 2011). In an example of this politicization, one popular chant during the Revolution linked the brutality of police forces with state corruption:

> He [the police officer] was always a loser, a jest/he barely got 50% on his high-school test/with a bribe the rich kid's a fool no more/got 100 diplomas hanging on his door/You crows nesting in our house/why are you ruining all our fun?/We won't do as you tell us/Spare us your face/Cook up your case/That's what the Interior does/I'm arrested and charged as a terrorist/Just for holding a flare and singing Ahly. (Lindsey 2011)

As this chant shows, some Ultra members perceived that police and military leaders—those with status and secure employment—were the true "losers," not

ordinary Ultra members. That is, Ultra members resented the police not only for their brutality, but also for their corruption and unearned privileges. In this way, Ultra groups became increasingly politicized in reaction to police brutality and their perceptions of injustice.

Still, this politicization is not uniform within and between Ultra groups. For instance, Ultras with anarchist leanings claimed that their participation in the Revolution was purely non-political. As one White Knight leader claimed, Ultras "don't give a fuck about politics of the stability of the country. Zamalek is our country and Ahly is their country" (Lindsey 2011). Indeed, Ultra groups did and continue to encompass a wide range of ideological persuasions. By and large, however, the Egyptian Revolution politicized many Ultra members who fought to eliminate the Egyptian state's repressive presence in public space.

In short, during the Revolution, Ultra groups became increasingly politicized as members resisted police forces and supported other protesters. More directly political, Ultras undermined the legitimacy Mubarak's repressive regime by exposing how it sought to use violence to dominate public space. Indeed, although Ultras struggled against police forces in public spaces throughout Egypt, they did so most visibly in Tahrir Square—perhaps the grandest embodiment of public space in all of the country.

From revolution to tragedy

Ultra groups have had difficulty navigating post-Mubarak Egypt. In this post-revolutionary context, two contradictory tendencies characterize the Ultras movement, both of which center around the Ultras' role in public space. First, the popularity and visibility of Ultra groups led to overextended memberships, thereby fragmenting the Ultras movement and enabling Egypt's security forces to manipulate soccer violence. Second, many Ultras have continued to challenge authoritarian tendencies of Egyptian leaders. As a result, Ultras serve as a source of hope for some Egyptians alienated by military rule and the Muslim Brotherhood government.

Because Ultra groups gained notoriety following after the Revolution, many soccer enthusiasts sought to join the groups, attracted by their popularity and growing prestige. With increasing membership levels, Ultras became perhaps the second largest civic organizations behind the Muslim Brotherhood (Dorsey 2012f). However, new members often lacked the commitment and knowledge of longtime Ultras, leading to instances of unplanned violence.

For example, in April 2011, members of Ultras White Knights stormed the field of Cairo's International Stadium during the closing minutes of an African Champions League Match. White Knight leaders claimed that this outburst demonstrated the declining discipline and unity of their group (Dorsey 2011). Such spontaneous violence gave some credibility back to Ultras' enemy—the security forces. Indeed, state representatives cited such outbursts as evidence that law and order had broken down after police forces withdrew from public spaces following their embarrassing performance in the Egyptian Revolution

(Dorsey 2011). This argument, in turn, justified the renewal of police control in public spaces.

Despite this conservative reaction, many Ultras remained politicized, contesting authoritarian tendencies that endured in the Egyptian state. For example, after Mubarak resigned, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) took power, promising a six-month transitionary period before elections. After this deadline passed and no elections were held, Ultras once again joined demonstrators around Egypt, this time to demand fair elections (Bilal 2011). At soccer matches, Ultras chanted, "Military police, you are dogs like the Interior Ministry. Write it on the prison's walls, down down with military rule" (Zayed 2012). Several Ultras died in these clashes and many protesters—10,000, according to some estimates—were arrested and tried in military tribunals (Mackell 2011). Eventually, in late 2011, SCAF did allow parliamentary elections to be held, complying with the demands of Ultras and other protesters. In spring 2012, SCAF permitted a presidential vote that resulted in the election of Mohamed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood member and the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) candidate.

However, presidential elections came after leaders in the state apparatus exacted revenge against Ultras for their role in the Egyptian Revolution. More than perhaps any other single event since 2011, the Port Said massacre shaped Ultras' status in the public sphere.

The Port Said massacre occurred at a soccer match on February 1st, 2012, near the one-year anniversary of the Egyptian Revolution. Leading up to the Port Said events, Ultra groups—especially Ultras Ahlawy—had become increasingly vocal in condemning SCAF's authoritarian tendencies in cities throughout Egypt. On February 1st, Ultras Ahlawy members followed Club Al-Ahly to Port Said for a match against Al-Masry Club. After the match, which ended in an unexpected victory for the underdog Al-Masry team, people dressed as Al-Masry fans stormed the field and attacked Ultras Ahlawy members and other Al-Ahly supporters. More than 1,000 people were seriously injured and 79 died ("Egyptian police incited," 2012). Mahmoud Ghandour, a chief leader of Ultras Ahlawy, was among the dead (Dubois 2012).

Evidence indicates that state security forces were likely complicit in this violence. On the one hand, it is true that security forces sought to avoid interacting with Ultras after being embarrassed during the January and February demonstrations. Also, brawls between rival soccer fans are not uncommon in Egypt. However, on the other hand, such fights generally occur when fans from the losing team lash out against those from the winning side. Yet the Al-Masry team had unexpectedly won the match against Club Al-Ahly. Furthermore, numerous security officials and riot officers were present at the stadium when violence erupted against Al-Ahly fans. According to witnesses, these officers did not intervene to stop the dozens of men who attacked Al-Ahly fans with swords and knives. Mohamed Zekri, a forward on the Ahly team, described this scene in an interview. According to his statements, Zekri heard police tell Al-Masry fans to "Go and beat the shit out of them [the Ahly fans]"

("Egyptian police incited," 2012). He also saw "about 10 armed thugs gathering right in front of the police" armed with swords and other weapons "but not a single one of them [the police officers] moved" ("Egyptian police incited," 2012). Other eyewitness testimony suggests that police blocked stadium exists and turned off the stadium lights to prevent video footage and to increase the mayhem (Al-Youm 2012). At minimum, fact that almost all deaths and injuries were of Ahly supporters suggests premeditation on the side of the aggressors (Al-Youm 2012).

Because of these suspicious circumstances, Ahlawy members claimed that the attack was not a manifestation of soccer "hooliganism" but, rather, the carefully calculated revenge of state forces. These members saw the attack as retribution for Ultras' prominent role in the Egyptian Revolution, which, after all, occurred almost exactly one year prior to the Port Said massacre. As one Ultra claimed, "This is a conspiracy by those in the Tora" prison, where Mubarak's former ministers had been detained on charges of ordering the police to kill protesters ("Egypt: Port Said," 2012). Many Egyptians thus claimed that pro-Mubarak individuals instigated the massacre, with state security forces consciously neglecting to intervene (Mustafa 2013).

Whatever the precise origins of the Port Said massacre, the event had two main ramifications for Ultras.

First, the event partially isolated Ultra groups insofar as the massacre convinced more conservative and ultra-religious Egyptians that Ultras are violence-prone soccer fanatics ("Egypt: Port Said," 2012). These Egyptians suggested that the massacre stemmed from the hooliganism of soccer fans. For this reason, Port Said paradoxically strengthened the position of the police, renewing calls for law and order. While Ultras previously contested the control of the state in public spaces, ironically, violence surrounding them came to justify the role of the state in these spaces. Indeed, even many Ultras agreed that renewed law and order was needed in public space, but argued that such order would be impossible without police reforms ("Egypt: Port Said," 2012).

Second, the Port Said massacre brought Ultras more deeply into politics than some members perhaps intended. For example, just a week before the Port Said massacre, Ultras Ahlawy's Facebook page stated that the group was determined to remain non-political, but that its members were free as individuals to participate in politics or protest. The group "emphasize[d] that its members are free in their political choices" (Dorsey 2012a). However, the Port Said events pulled Ultras Ahlawy deeper into politics, its brutality reinvigorating a revolutionary urgency for Ultra members (Elgarnousy 2012). For instance, in the months following the massacre, Ultra members forced a former Ah-Ahly goalkeeper, Ahmed Shobeir, to withdraw his bid for the Egyptian Football Association (EFA) presidency by charging him with corruption and links to Mubarak (Maher 2012). Soon after these accusations, Egypt's main prosecutor began an investigation into Shobeir's financial irregularities. Likewise, throughout 2012, many Ultras continued to participate in demonstrations and protests (El-Gundy, Ali, and Sharnoubi 2012).

In these continuing protests, Ultras' political demands expanded to include justice in the legal system and the reform of the police. After an investigation, prosecutors charged 9 mid-level security officials and 72 citizens for the Port Said crimes ("After verdict," 2013). However, the slow pace of this trial frustrated Ultras members, who vowed to prevent domestic soccer from resuming play until the trial's conclusion. To pressure the EFA into accepting this demand, Ultras Ahlawy members led several demonstrations at EFA headquarters. Ultras also disrupted professional soccer practices around Cairo to prevent play from resuming (Dorsey 2012g). In November 2012, EFA submitted to Ultras' demands by approving plans to indefinitely postpone play until the conclusion of the Port Said trial. This postponement increased the visibility of the trial, focusing attention on the fact that few judicial and no police reforms had occurred since the 2011 Revolution (Brown 2012).

In turn, however, this postponement exacerbated tensions between Ultras and their soccer clubs. For example, Egyptian soccer players, workers, and managers went without work during this hiatus. In October 2012, these workers demonstrated to protest their circumstances, sitting in at a Cairo hotel where the Nigerian national team was staying prior to an international match (Halawa and Adam 2012). Ultras Ahlawy members sought to counteract this protest to ensure that the postponement of domestic soccer remained in place. These Ultras waged a counter-protest, arranging an escort for the Nigerian players to Cairo Stadium. One Nigerian player said after the event, "It is a unique position, to see fans with that much power" (Montague 2012c). Thus, in addition to showing the continued effectiveness of Ultras' strategies, this intervention also demonstrated growing tensions between Ultra groups and soccer workers.

In spring of 2013, the Port Said Criminal Court reached a final verdict in the slow-moving trail. The Court sentenced 21 of the 72 accused civilians to death. It sentenced one senior security officer to fifteen years in prison, another to a life term, and found seven of the nine accused policemen to be innocent ("After verdict," 2013). This ruling appeased some Ahlawy members, but spurred widespread riots in Port Said. Port Said's residents protested against the perceived harshness of the ruling as riots caused more than forty additional deaths ("After verdict," 2013). Although Egyptian soccer resumed play in April 2013, fans are not yet allowed to attend some matches due to security concerns (Dorsey 2013). Ultras have thus struggled to retain purpose without opportunities to organize stadium events during games—after all, these groups cannot attend most matches and the postponement of soccer lasted over a year. As a result, according to one Ultras leader, "everything has changed, yet nothing has really changed [since Port Said]— for us, the biggest challenge has been trying to stay united without our common ground of football" (El-Nabawi 2012). Without the bond of soccer, Ultra groups have struggled to retain group interconnectivity.

In this context, some Ultras have relied on demonstrations in public squares to reinforce group collectivity. Indeed, Ultras have remained active in demonstrations against lingering injustices and elements of state

authoritarianism. For example, in October 2012, Ultras members called for police reforms and clashed with other demonstrators in Tahrir Square. In these clashes, Ultras protested the acquittal of 24 people who had been charged with ordering the killing of protesters during the 2011 "Battle of Camels" ("After verdict," 2013). Furthermore, in a November 2012 decree, President Morsi assumed powers formerly reserved for the judicial and legislative branches. Perceived as a power grab, this act sparked renewed clashes between Ultra members and security forces. On Mohammed Mahmoud and Qasr al Aini Streets, Ultras joined demonstrators, their chants echoing those from the Revolution: "The people want to topple the regime," "Do not be afraid, Morsi has to leave," and "Down with Mohamed Morsi Mubarak" (El-Gundy, Ali, and Sharnoubi 2012).

Morsi had likely sought to avoid such condemnations from Ultras, since he made several statements supportive of them following the Port Said massacre (Dorsey 2012b). Notwithstanding this earlier support, paramilitaries with ties to Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood surfaced during these demonstrations to antagonize Ultras and secular protesters—often with intimidating violence (Eleiba 2013). However, during some of these skirmishes, police and military forces refrained from intervening. Thus, in these intense cycles of pro- and anti-Morsi demonstrations, Ultras did have some independence from the state, but faced harassment from a non-state foe in pro-Morsi paramilitaries ("Egypt: Investigate," 2012). Since these late 2012 clashes, pro-Morsi militias have been less visible, but Ultra members have continued to clash with police forces ("Ahly's Ultras," 2013). However, as Zeinab Abul-Magd (2013) has suggested, these clashes take place in a very different context than those under Mubarak. That is, Morsi's emerging authoritarian regime has continued to rely on police brutality, but is no longer able to generate fear.

While Ultras continue to struggle for autonomy, their future role in public space is, at this juncture, difficult to determine. Some commentators have argued that Ultras should become even more involved in politics to challenge the hegemony of the Muslim Brotherhood, FJP, and other Islamist parties (El-Mahdi 2012). However, Ultra leaders have resisted such calls, likely for two main reasons. First, Ultra members are young men who focus on soccer, and, as a result, it would be difficult to expect that Egyptian leaders would take Ultras seriously in political debates. Second, Ultras' greatest asset lies in their flexibility: Ultras do not have the burden of creating contentious political platforms but can nevertheless shape Egyptian politics through selective interventions. Accordingly, Ultra leaders have refused to meet with parties and politically affiliated organizations (Parker 2012). Indeed, it is important to recognize that Ultras remain, above all else, organizations focused and centered on soccer. This is not to imply that Ultras' political interventions will cease—to the contrary, some of these organizations have continued to clash with police into 2013. However, for the foreseeable future, it is most probable that the trajectory of Ultra groups will resemble the pattern that these groups followed prior to the Egyptian Revolution, where some members were active in political demonstrations, but the majority concentrated more exclusively on soccer.

In sum, Ultras' team pride and rebellious spirit first enabled them to challenge state control of public space. During the Egyptian Revolution, Ultras' demands grew as they undermined the legitimacy of the authoritarian state through large-scale protests and demonstrations. Ultra membership swelled and their visibility increased following the Revolution, leaving leaders occasionally unable to maintain organizational unity and discipline. Despite this difficulty, some Ultras have remained highly politicized, especially in reaction to the Port Said massacre. These Ultras continue to challenge state attempts to control civic spaces and expressions. For some Egyptians and secular activists, Egypt's Ultras thus embody the enthusiasm and original ideals of Egyptian Revolution (El-Mahdi, Rabab, and Korany 2012).

Afterward: Ultras and the unbearable lightness of democratic politics

To explain the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe, Slovenian theorist Slavoj Žižek (2012) offered an arresting interpretation of the unpredictable emergence of democratic movements. Žižek explains how such movements often appear "out of joint" with their historical and social context. Democratic openings and emancipatory events, he argues, do not fit with preceding models and narratives. He writes,

> We should turn around the usual historicist perspective of understanding an event out of its context and genesis... Emancipatory outbursts cannot be understood in this way: instead of analyzing them as a part of the continuum of past/present, we should bring in the perspective of the future, i.e., we should analyze them as limited, distorted (sometimes even perverted) fragments of a utopian future which lies dormant in the present as its hidden potential. (p. 128)

For Žižek, socio-historical context cannot fully account for truly new forms of democratic politics. Such events restructure the conceptual and political context from which they emerge and, as a result, do not fit with preceding narratives and conceptual categories.

Applying this insight to the experience of Ultras in the Egyptian Revolution is an unexpectedly productive approach. Indeed, Ultra groups defy at least three dominant narratives and stereotypes, offering observers an opening to rethink the central categories that underlie perceptions of Egyptian society.

First, Ultras are comprised of young Egyptian men, but these organizations have neither a fundamentalist nor Islamist ideology, defying tropes of Arab youths. Indeed, for Ultras members, soccer itself takes on a quasi-sacred dimension. Second, several Western observers (and Mubarak himself) argued that Ultras are primarily anarchical and destructive. For example, in a 2012 article for the *Los Angeles Times*, Ned Parker stated that the Ultras combine "the aggression of the hoodlums in a 'Clockwork Orange' and the anarchy of the Sex

Pistons...The Ultras have since cast a chill over Egyptian Society." However, Ultras defy this stereotype because they rely on discipline and organizational unity to coordinate Ultra clubs that span across Egypt. Furthermore, Ultras played a key role in the democratic movement of 2011 and anti-authoritarian struggles since, again illustrating how Ultras do not fit the label of "hooliganism" used to describe them. Lastly, even though Ultras continue to fight authoritarian elements of the Egyptian state, these groups are unconcerned with the West and focus almost exclusively on Egyptian soccer and politics. In this way, Ultras defy a dominant narrative that Western observers sometimes construct when they explain Middle Eastern politics as a struggle between pro-Western liberals and anti-Western fundamentalists.

Overall, then, Ultras are a byproduct of Egypt's historical experience, but in practice, they clash with dominant conceptions of Egyptian society. As a result, they offer us, as observers, an opportunity to confront these dominant narratives and interrogate the biases that may underlie our perceptions. In short, the role of Ultras in the Egyptian Revolution gives us a glimpse into the diverse possibilities and unexpected political subjectivities that can emerge within democratic risings.

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