And the Fans Play On

Following last month’s tragic events in Port Said, the Ultras are now more in the spotlight than ever.

By Passant Rabie

The streets of Zamalek were blocked off, as rows upon rows of cars parked at a standstill along Abou El-Feda Street. Groups of young men in bright red football jerseys ran past the cars and their confused passengers. They had to be at the meeting point at exactly 4pm.

The numbers were massive; thousands upon thousands gathered in front of Al-Ahly Club. It was surprisingly quiet for such a large crowd. Even when the silence was broken by sirens from a Central Security Forces truck that made its way through the people, uninvited, they still kept their composure. Finally, as they started to make their way through the relatively narrow streets, the crowd spoke, chanting in an overpowering voice, “With our soul, with our blood, we sacrifice ourselves for you, martyr.”

The march was organized by the Ultras Ahlawy, a group of hardcore Ahly fans, to demand justice for the victims of the Port Said football tragedy, where over 70 people lost their lives after a February 1 league match between Ahly and Masry. The crowd carried large banners with the martyrs’ faces painted

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in black, while waving the Ahly flag and the occasional flag of their Zamalek counterparts, the White Knights, as well.

From the neighborhood of Zamalek and across the Sixth of October Bridge, they walked to the public prosecutor’s office Downtown, all the while chanting their familiar songs and clapping in unison.

One thing that they did not do was turn it into a political protest. Unlike many marches converging on city squares recently, the demand “Down with military rule,” was never uttered. The Ultras constantly made it clear that they were peacefully marching for the martyrs’ rights only.

According to Mohamed Beshir, better known as Gemyhood, author of a book about these hardcore fans called The Ultras and an expert on the group, the only reason that the February 3 march was organized was because it was an issue that dealt directly with the Ultras’ rights.

“They are only mobilized as a group when it’s a cause concerning them personally,” says Beshir.

In The Ultras, Beshir traces the largely undocumented origins and history of football Ultras to Italy in the 1960s. Unable to keep up with rising ticket prices, a group of students and workers would watch the games from behind the goalkeeper, the cheapest seats available. They were later referred to as the 12th player due to their constant cheering throughout the entire game, and won the nickname ultras because their team loyalty was over and above the norm. The movement then spread across North Africa to countries such as Libya, Tunisia and Morocco before finally making its way to Egypt.

“We were late in developing the Ultras, because we are a country that doesn’t travel abroad and we’re not open to European culture,” says Beshir.

Ahmed Ghaffar, better known as Heema, one of the founding members of Ultras Ahlawy, recalls attending a match in Tunisia for the African Cup of Nations in 2004 where he became familiar with the Ultras.

Back home, Ghaffar was a member of the Ahly Football Club (AFC), an organized group with the same idea but neither as active nor as organized. In 2007, Ghaffar and some others from AFC officially formed Ultras Ahlawy.

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“At first, there were some differences between us and AFC, but they disbanded a year after the Ultras formed because there was no need to have two groups,” says Ghaffar.

The AFC was not the only group that the Ultras would have differences with. One of the slogans most commonly used by Ultras groups around the globe is “A.C.A.B.” which stands for ‘All Cops Are Bastards.’

“All over the world, the Ultras always get into fights with security forces. It’s a constant war over the stadium, who controls this space?” explains Beshir, who wrote in his book that security forces would rather have people cheering in a “classic” way, with football fans staying quietly in their seats. Members of the Ultras consider this to be not only an infringement on their rights as fans but an infringement of their freedom in general.

“The friction between us and security forces started around four years ago,” says Ahmed, a founding member of Ultras White Knights, who asked that his full name not be used to abide by the Ultras’ belief that members should not seek attention for themselves.

While they used to be able to deal with the Muslim Brotherhood as a ‘banned group,’ they couldn’t handle seeing another group that was organized and getting recognition. There was always the fear that such an organized group would start becoming more aware of its surroundings and more aware of what’s right and what’s wrong.”

As a result, constant fights would break out at the stadium between security forces
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“They did not make a decision to [take part in] the revolution as a group. They’re not a political group,” says Beshir. “They were just fighting against injustice and fighting for freedom.”

Ghaffar agrees. “I saw young people like me getting hit with tear gas and rubber bullets; it reached out to us as human beings,” he recalls. “This is how we’re generally mobilized as Egyptians, through emotion and regardless of whether the protestors’ demands are right or wrong.”

But as the Ultras lost more and more members in the clashes, the dynamic changed.

“We had a lot of people who died in the revolution, and afterward during the November and December clashes,” says Ghaffar. “So now my problem with [security forces] is personal since [they’ve] killed people from my group.”

At that time, chants against the Ministry of Interior and the police such as, “Ya Ghorab w Me’ashesh,” (referring to former Interior Minister Habib El-Adly being an old crow still nesting in Egypt) began to be heard in the football stadium.

“We were waiting for revenge,” says Ghaffar. “We expected mass arrests, we expected two or three deaths.”

What unfolded was a nightmare scenario. On February 1, as soon as the final whistle sounded to end the match between Al-Ahly and Al-Masry at Port Said Stadium, scores of people stormed the field, attacking Al-Ahly fans; at least 74 young men died in the melee. Autopsies found that some had been crushed in the stampede by panicked fans, while others had been strangled, stabbed or beaten to death. Several videos showed people with weapons running past security forces who refrained from intervening and stood by looking on.

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Currently, each team’s Ultras group has around four to five thousand active members, divided into smaller groups by district with each district headed by one person. However, as numbers increase, it gets harder to properly organize the Ultras.

"Ever since it turned into a trend, the new members are getting younger and it’s becoming harder to control their behavior," says Beshir.

"Either way, I’m against it being taken too seriously and against it being too cool, but no one has managed strike that balance," he adds. "This is not a job, it’s an activity that they do on the weekend. At the end of the day, it’s just a game.”

Ahmed of the White Knights would still rather maintain their underground identity.

“There has been more awareness about the Ultras since the revolution, but we didn’t want everyone to be talking about us, whether it’s praise or criticism. We wanted to be backstage,” he says. “We believe in self-denial, that’s one of our core beliefs. Even if [our entrance into a stadium] was organized by a certain person, we don’t say who it was.”

However, since the Ultras’ role in the revolution, and even more so after the Port Said incident, the media and public have been dubbing this as the Ultras’ transition into politics. Beshir says that’s not accurate: “Nobody should label them as anything but ‘football fans’.”

The writer acknowledges that in some countries, there are Ultras groups formed solely on political affiliations, such as Ultras who are all leftist, fascist or liberal, but he stresses that these groups formed 30 to 40 years ago while Egypt’s Ultras are still relatively new.

“In Egypt, the members are from different social backgrounds,” Beshir points out. “Some are politically aware while others are not aware at all.”

Ahmed adds, “If we had a political agenda then we would’ve ridden the wave after the revolution or during the parliamentary elections, but politics is not our game.”

One thing that does concern the Ultras is that the group may become merely a fad.

“Last year led to speeding their growth as a group but also ruining it,” says Beshir. “A lot more people now know what Ultras means, but it’s becoming a trend so people want to join the Ultras just for the lifestyle, not because of their loyalty to the football club.”

Following the incident in Port Said, the Ultras were forced to break their golden rule of not appearing in the media.

“One of the main principles of the Ultras is that we don’t belong on television, we belong in the stadium,” says Ghaffar. “However, we felt that only one side of the story was being told. We decided to go to the media and convey the picture of what really happened because these young men are our responsibility. So we put their rights before our rules.”

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