Football as a barometer of political trends

In Saudi Arabia, more youth reportedly go to football matches than to mosques. In Jordan, thousands of supporters call for the King to divorce his Palestinian wife. In Egypt, a fan group with more than 1.1 million followers have started to organize protests at universities.

Football matches with large youth gatherings have become a unique phenomenon in the Arab world. As young fans started to go to the stadiums with people of their own age rather than their fathers, they experienced a new autonomy from parental tutelage. Football matches thus evolved as the most substantial form of patriarch-independent, autonomous youth gathering. This has had political implications. Age group bonding through football has been referred to as ‘ordered segmentation’ or ‘the Bedouin factor’ of football. The age groups defend and control territories at the football stadiums. When involved with conflicts with external groups – like opposing fans or the police – largely independent segments of different youth communities gathered at the football terraces unite. In the autocratic Arab world, arenas for political participation are largely lacking. At football matches, youth autonomy can be experienced and simultaneously political messages can be publicly expressed. This has made many of the football matches of the Arab world barometers of political trends. Furthermore, football supporters have initiated struggles that affect political developments in their countries.

Football and Emancipation in Saudi Arabia

When the Riyadh team Al-Hilal played the final in the Asian football cup in November 2014, 70,000 people attended. The huge popularity of the sport has put pressure on national sport authorities. When Saudi Arabia failed to qualify for the World Cup in 2012, the head of the Saudi Arabian Football
Federation, Prince Nawaf bin Faisal, was forced to step down. For the first time a member of the royal family had to step down and be replaced by a commoner, through democratic elections within the football federation.

In 2013, Prince Faisal bin Turki – a nephew of King Abdullah – had to escape from a crowd of angry football fans who had organized a campaign to have him leave his position in their club in Riyadh. “Soccer clubs rather than mosques are likely to be the center of the revolution,” said an expert on Saudi politics from the Gulf Institute in Washington.

Moreover, Saudi women were, in 2013, for the first time given access to football matches, partly as a result of domestic pressure. A football league for women is organized underground. For away matches, the women go without their male protectors, sometimes secretly. One football player told the master’s student Charlotte Lyse that she used to tell her family that she was going studying, and that she secretly threw her football equipment out the window to go and play. “I am an activist,” another player said, admitting that she had female emancipation as her hidden agenda when playing football.

Football in Saudi Arabia reveals how there is a deep incongruence between the culture and normative preferences of youth and the old men controlling the state. During the World Cup in 2014, religious authorities prevented the youth from watching football matches during praying time, physically blocking the passage to Internet cafes. When football has become the most democratic space in the Saudi society, where popular pressure has led to elections of new leaders, this illuminates deeper tensions in the Saudi system. At the football arena, youth opposition to the elders and cultural opposition to religious conservatism have merged. The challenge of the Saudi authorities is to prevent this opposition expanding beyond the sphere of football.

Jordan: “We want the Palestinians out”

While football is a battleground for democratization in Saudi Arabia, it has recently become an arena for the struggle to prevent it in Jordan. Football matches in Jordan have for decades been politically loaded with struggles over national symbols linked to the 1970 civil war. Thus, *mulukhiya*, a dish from the *mulukhiya* grass plant, has recently become a contested symbol. East Bank Jordanians - of Bedouin origin, not used to cultivating the land and historically looking down on the peasants who did - do not eat *mulukhiya*, whereas Palestinian refugees – mainly of peasant origin - do. When the tremendously popular team among Palestinians in Jordan, Wihdat, from a refugee camp in Amman, won the Jordanian league in May 2014, anti-Palestinian Jordanian supporters chanted “grasseaters, grasseaters” throughout the match. However, when Wihdat won, securing the title, a Wihdat supporter stormed the pitch, waving a *mulukhiya* plant towards the supporters, as if it was a Palestinian flag. Earlier in the 2014 season, when Wihdat played against their arch-enemies, the historically strongest East Bank
Jordanian team, Faisali, known for its anti-Palestinian supporters, Faisali supporters chanted: “Al mulukhiya wa al jisr – take your mulukhiya and leave Jordan by the bridge.”

Every time when Faisali and Wihdat play, there are disturbances. In 2010, outside the Amman stadium, cars and shops were set ablaze and 250 people were injured in clashes. Wihdat leaders afterwards claimed that they had been victims of a deliberate attack by an alliance of Faisali supporters and Jordanian security forces. “We want the Palestinians out,” Faisali supporters had chanted during the match, and: “Talaqha Abu Hussein”, which means “Divorce her, Abu Hussein [King Abdullah].” This was a reference to the King’s wife, Queen Rania, who is of Palestinian origin. The Faisali supporters wanted the King to divorce the Queen, and Jordan to be divorced from the Palestinians.

Commenting on the football disturbances, officials used the phrase “a threat to national unity.” Notably, the same phrase was used, even by the King himself, after the Jordanian democratization movement was cracked down on in March 2011. But then there was hardly a clash between two opposing groups, but rather an attack on demonstrators by organized thugs allied with Jordanian security forces, according to reports.

Jordanians of East Bank origin are a minority in Jordan, where the Palestinians are the majority. Apparently, one aspect of football disturbances in Jordan is thus that anti-Palestinian anti-democracy forces have merged. For anti-Palestinian East Bank football supporters, the aim is the same as for the autocrats of the Jordanian deep state: to prevent democratization and preserve the status quo.

From football hooligans to revolutionaries in Egypt

In Egypt, football as an arena for political struggle and resistance goes back more than 100 years. When the most successful club in Egypt, Al-Ahli, meaning “national” in Arabic, was founded in 1907, it was as a cover for activists fighting British colonial rule. Al-Ahli members have remained at the center of political struggles in Egypt ever since.

Thus, it was organized Al-Ahli supporters who formed the front line in Tahrir Square in Cairo during the Egyptian revolution. The “ultras” of Al-Ahli knew how to fight the police, from the football stadiums. They knew how to hit and run, escape and regroup, and how to endure mistreatment and exposure to tear gas. The revolution could have failed had it not been for the efforts of the Al-Ahli “ultras” to prevent the Tahrir Square from being cleared in January 2011.

Their part in the revolution was also the background for the massacre in Port Said in February 2012, where seventy-nine people, mainly Al-Ahli supporters, were killed. Reportedly, the Al-Ahli supporters were attacked and killed by Mubarak supporters. The massacre was “a plot against democratic transition, a revenge,” according to the Muslim Brotherhood leader Essam Al-Eriam. Since the Port Said massacre,
football supporters have been banned from entering the stadiums in Egypt.

That the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) leader Al-Eriam referred to the Port Said massacre as “revenge” does not imply that Al-Ahli supporters are affiliated with the MB. The supporters do not share a uniform ideological platform, and also demonstrated against the MB during their short time in power. If anything, they share a kind of anti-authoritarian, negative class-consciousness, defining themselves by their opponents.

They nevertheless represent significant fan power. Their Facebook page is said to have 1.1 million followers. In November 2014, thousands of Al-Ahli supporters forced themselves into a stadium to watch Al-Ahli play, using a truck to break down one of the closed gates. Security officials had to give the supporters permission to see the match, to avoid a bloody confrontation.

Reportedly, along with other supporter groups, Al-Ahli supporters have recently been active in organizing demonstrations at universities. Football thus remains an essential instrument of youth political engagement and anti-government organization in Egypt.

**Conclusion**

The fear that political reforms and democratization lead to instability and civil war has largely suspended the Arab uprisings. A democracy-reversing wave has ostensibly followed the democratization wave of the Arab Spring. However, football disturbances show how political frustrations are still boiling under the surface. Football unrest reveals how the factors underlying the Arab upheaval – autocracy, youth unemployment, patriarchy – are still omnipresent in the region. Youths who believe that finding a relevant job in the future will be as unlikely as having political reforms in their country, may prove hard to control, outside the football stadiums as well as inside.

- Facilitate local cooperation projects and aid projects within the field of sport. Football clubs, like the Wihdat club in Jordan, and its youth, are in need of responsible, professional cooperation partners. This is a field where Norwegian teams and experts could play a role.
- Football should not merely be regarded as popular culture, but also as a political barometer. Thus there is a need for increased research on youth and football culture in the Arab world, which should be facilitated and supported in order to monitor popular political trends.

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**The New Middle East: Emerging Political and Ideological Trends (NewME)**

* A research project based at the University of Oslo, comprising researchers from PRIO and the UiO. There are several researchers on the project, each working on their own sub-projects within a common framework. The project started in 2011 and will be completed by the summer of 2016. The project is founded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.