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SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

MASTER'S THESIS

EGYPT'S ULTRAS: RHIZOMIC PROLIFERATION AND POLITICAL MISCALCULATIONS

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THESIS ADVISOR
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ISTANBUL, 2025

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by
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A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's degree of Political Science and International Relations

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ÖZ

MISIR'IN ULTRALARI: RİZOMATİK YAYILMA VE POLİTİK HESAP HATALARI

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Mısır'daki Ultras grupları üzerine kapsamlı bir akademik literatür bulunmasına rağmen, rejimin onlara yönelik şiddetli saldırısının ardındaki nedenler yeterince incelenmemiştir. Bu çalışma, Mısır devletinin Ultras üyelerine yönelik baskıyı artırma kararının yapısal ve politik nedenlerini ortaya koymayı amaçlamakta; 2012 Port Said katliamının sadece güvenlik aygıtının intikam eylemi olduğu yönündeki anlatıya meydan okumaktadır. Mevcut literatür üzerine inşa edilen bu araştırma, konuyu Mısır rejiminin gelişimi ve yönetim felsefesi üzerine olan daha geniş bir akademik çerçeveye oturtmaktadır. Çalışma, Ultras gruplarının nasıl çerçevelendiğini ve onlara karşı birleşen farklı aktörleri ortaya koymak için televizyon yayınları ve devlet medyası gibi birincil kaynaklara yoğun biçimde başvurmaktadır. Bulgular, Mısır'ın siyasi tarihi ve kendine özgü futbol kültürüyle şekillenen stadyumların, merkeziyetçi olmayan örgütlenme biçimlerinin ortaya çıkmasına imkân sağladığını göstermektedir. Bu gruplar, merkezi olmayan ve hiyerarşik olmayan ağlar olan "rizomlar" şeklinde gelişmiş; devlet kontrolüne karşı dayanıklılıklarını kanıtlamışlardır. Bu yapı, 2011 devrim sonrası dönemde toplumun örgütlenmedeki yetersizliğini açığa çıkardığı bir zamanda alternatif bir örgütlenme modeli sunması, devletin standart stratejilerine direnç göstermesi ve hem bir propaganda aracı hem de devletin bir uzantısı olan bir alanı domine etmesi gibi nedenlerle rejim için birçok tehdidi beraberinde getirmiştir. Rejim, Ultrasları yalnızca birer huzur bozucu değil, aynı zamanda hızla yayılmakta olan alternatif bir seferberlik biçiminin öncüleri olarak görmüştür. Bu nedenle rejimin

saldırısı, toplumda kök salmaya başlayan bu yeni seferberlik biçimini bastırmaya yönelik bilinçli bir çabanın parçasıydı.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kamusal Alanların Yönetimi, Mısır, Otoriterlik, Rizom, Siyasal Seferberlik, Stadyumlar, Ultralar.

ABSTRACT

EGYPT'S ULTRAS: RHIZOMIC PROLIFERATION AND POLITICAL MISCALCULATIONS

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Despite extensive scholarship on Egypt's Ultras, the reasons underlying the regime's violent assault on them remain underexplored. This research seeks to uncover the structural and political reasons behind the Egyptian state's decision to crack down on Ultras members, challenging the narrative that the Port Said 2012 massacre was merely an act of revenge by the security apparatus. Building upon previous literature, this study situates the issue within the broader scholarship on the Egyptian regime's development and governing philosophy. It relies heavily on primary sources, including televised segments and state media, to explore how Ultras groups were framed and to uncover the different parties that united against them. The findings show that stadiums, shaped by Egypt's political history and unique football culture, offered spaces for decentralized forms of organization to emerge. These groups developed as Rhizomes: decentralized, non-hierarchical networks that proved their resilience against state control. This structure presented numerous challenges to the regime, including offering an alternative organizational model at a time when the 2011 post-revolution period exposed the society's ineffectiveness in organizing, its resistance to the state's standard strategies, and its dominance of a domain that served as both a propaganda tool and an extension of the state. The regime viewed the Ultras not merely as troublemakers but as harbingers of alternative forms of mobilization that were rapidly proliferating. Thus, its assault was a calculated effort to suppress the novel form of mobilization that was taking root in the society at large.

Keywords: Authoritarianism, Egypt, Governance of Public Spaces, Political Mobilization, Rhizome, Stadiums, Ultras.

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LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

An	Icon or Abbreviation Description
ALU	Ahly Lovers Union
ASU	Arab Socialist Union
EFA	Egyptian Football Association
ERTU	Egyptian Radio and Television Union
FA	Football Association
NDP	National Democratic Party
NSF	National Salvation Front
SCAF	Supreme Council of the Armed Forces
UA07	Ultras Ahlawy
UWK	Ultras White Knights

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction to the Egyptian Ultras

When the eye meets the Egyptian political scene, it appears as though completely still; no prominent parties, no open discourse, and no space left for dissent. Any onlooker would be dismayed to realize that just a few years ago, after the 2011 uprisings, Egypt's political liveliness was at an all-time high. For a moment, there were no retractions, and political groups emerged everywhere, representing the Egyptian populace, with all its differences and competing visions. Contrary to the hopes of many, the democratic experience was swiftly reversed. Within less than half a decade, political repression reached an all-time high, and that diverse, lively political scene was buried below the surface. This study centers on Ultras groups; one of the more unusual, yet significant, political actors that appeared in 2011. Ultras groups are football fan organizations, each dedicated to their respective teams, and their members accept the team as a core part of their identity.

Ultras groups were initially apolitical groups that sought seclusion from politics, yet after many of their members appeared in the 2011 revolution, they became a target of the state. Quickly after 2011, the state sought to end Ultras movements and accepted no compromise. Notably, victimization by the state was one of the main reasons (if not the primary reason) behind their politicization. Eventually, the Egyptian state reached its goal when the two largest Ultras groups, Ultras Ahlawy (UA07) and Ultras White Knights (UWK), officially disbanded in 2018. During their tenure, much academic interest directed toward UA07 and UWK, especially from sociologists. So far, the literature covers their emergence, many details regarding their internal structure, and most of their confrontations with the Egyptian state.

Although they were thoroughly studied, limited attention was given to the state's motivation to go after Ultras groups in the first place. Instead, it's taken as a given that this targeting was revenge for participation in the 2011 revolution or simply a result of the regime's aversion to pluralistic freedom-seeking organizations. This is the gap in the literature that this thesis seeks to fill. I aim to uncover the rationale behind the Egyptian state's lack of tolerance toward Ultras groups. The possibility of a compromise was evident, since Ultras groups, from their inception, sought to be apolitical. Moreover, other Arab states, such as Morocco, were able to reach a compromise. In Morocco, Ultras groups are still functioning and thriving, but they do so under the state's eye and with express approval for every significant Ultras function(Akabli et al., 2023). Similarly, Ultras groups continue to operate openly in Algeria and Tunisia.

To achieve this thesis's goal, I investigate the timeline of the struggle between Ultras groups and the Egyptian state, the structure of UA07, and the politicization of football post-1952, especially during the late Mubarak era. I focus on some critical junctures, the most important of which is the Port Said massacre. Central to answering the larger question, I try to answer why the state allowed the massacre to unfold, even though it reflected negatively on the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces' (SCAF) ability to maintain order while they were in control during the transitory period. For this, the massacre's motivations deserve more scrutiny, as it doesn't reflect poorly on other political forces. Lastly, I identify characteristics that set UA07 and UWK apart from other youth movements that were abundant post-2011.

This entire episode provides insight because it reveals the Egyptian state acting out of character. It is scarcely necessary to remark that the use of violence by the states to solve problems isn't uncharacteristic, but in this specific context, it is. Notably, during this period, there were many tools at the state's disposal, many of which are already being used with other groups, but instead the state chose the zero-sum option, which is proving costly over time. This rationale will be discussed in further detail in this thesis.

It has now been seven years since Ultras groups have been active and prominent in Egypt, but the shadow still looms. UA07 and UWK are still present in the memory of

Egyptian football fans. The results of the government actions against them persist, including the securitization of stadiums, the inability to recover mass appeal for football, and changing football from a cheap pastime for the average Egyptian to a capitalist endeavor. The issue of the Ultras is becoming increasingly relevant now that the government's inability to rally the population around football is becoming increasingly evident. Every time a festive occasion in Egyptian football without festivities, the ghost of Ultras groups reappears. This issue is of immediate relevance, as the current regime will soon need to find an answer to this propaganda tool that has been rendered obsolete.

1.2. Literature Review

Following the Arab Spring, in the literature, great attention has been given to Ultras groups. They were undoubtedly one of the more interesting aspects of the revolution; after all, to many, they seemed to appear out of nowhere and ended up playing a central role in 2011 and 2012. Early scholarship on the topic concentrate on them in relation to the revolution and its actors. Furthermore, most of the extensive studies on the topic are sociological, not political. The scope of political literature on them continues to be limited.

Several works have already examined the Ultras movements in Egypt, with the most significant and comprehensive being Carl Rommel's "Egypt Football Revolution: Emotion, Masculinity, and Uneasy Politics" and Ronnie Close's "Cairo's Ultras: Resistance and Revolution in Egypt's Football Culture." Rommel's book is central to this thesis, as it offers a rich collection of primary sources gathered from interviews he conducted over nearly a decade. These include not only Ultras members but also a wide range of individuals connected to Egyptian football, from journalists to regular fans. His work results from deep immersion in Egyptian football culture. It provides a broad framework for understanding Egyptian football from the late Mubarak era through the end of the Ultras. Rommel argues that Egyptian football culture is like a bubble sustained by recent successes, regime investment, and societal euphoria, which eventually bursts. He places the Ultras movements within this larger context. Although primarily rooted in ethnographic anthropology, Rommel's book is cross-disciplinary, offering an extensive account of the interplay between politics and football in Egypt,

how Mubarak politicized the sport, and public perceptions of this politicization. Additionally, Rommel highlights important events involving Ultras groups that are the literature overlooked, such as the 2012 Super Cup finals, the confrontation at the Opera House in 2012, and the massacre of Ultras Green Eagles members in January 2013.

Another significant contribution by Rommel is his documentation of the typical non-Ultra fan's opinion of Ultras groups. This provides a third perspective, one from people who are outside the conflict but still have a stake in it. They are neither connected to the state nor part of the Ultras, but still care about how their sport is impacted. Additionally, his book shows how these opinions change and develop over time. This helps us understand how the public responded to publicity around the Ultras and when they began losing their favor. Finally, Rommel aimed to document how the public viewed the politicization (*siyasa*) of football. He reveals the common Egyptian disdain for *siyasa* as a corrupting force that taints everything. As a result, football was perceived as being corrupted, even though it should be pure in its normal state. In this study, this idea is central to the later discussion of why the current regime still struggles to revive widespread excitement for football.

Close's book is the most significant work dedicated primarily to Egyptian Ultras groups. In it, he presents a detailed account of the Ultras groups, covering their history, structure, ideology, and rise and fall. Close's book has been a vital source for this thesis, mainly because of its focus on how Ultras groups developed as a subculture. The book contextualizes the emergence of this subculture in the broader context of Al Ahly and Al Zamalek's history.

Those studies mainly covered the history of the Ultras movements, their culture, how they organize, and their role in the 2011 revolution, which has been invaluable for this thesis. Nonetheless, so far, no study has sought to explain what makes the Ultras different from the other youthful movements in Egypt and why the state went so far as to wipe them out, even though they initially didn't have political demands or aspirations. Moreover, the existing literature doesn't delve into the state's political calculations and how it viewed these novel youth groups. This study sheds light on this, exploring how the state views UA07 and UWK and why they were deemed a risk. Additionally, this study challenges reductive narratives that attribute this antagonism

just to Ultras groups being militant or because they were anti-authoritarian. This study builds upon some issues that prior studies briefly discuss. Of the most central is the concept of Rhizomes, which Close mentioned briefly as an "appealing concept" to use when thinking about the Ultras movements. This concept will be greatly expounded upon in Chapter 1, as it is central to multiple arguments in this thesis.

In this thesis, I focus on some issues that are mentioned in the literature almost as givens; namely, the Ultras structure and the regime's reaction. Although a crackdown against a large independent youth group was to be expected, how events played out wasn't inevitable. There were many approaches that the regime could have taken toward the issue, and why it chose this specific response requires investigation. Similarly, the organizational structure of the Ultras groups was exceptional in Egypt. So far, no study has investigated how or why this specific structure emerged. Here appear gaps that this study is attempting to fill. It seeks to answer key related questions: Why did Ultras groups become horizontal structures? Why were they tolerated for half a decade before the revolution? Why did the regime view them as a threat? And why did they elicit this specific response from the state?

There exists an extensive literature on Ultras groups outside of Egypt. The most useful for this were works on North African Ultras organizations. Those groups are more like Egyptian groups than their European counterparts in terms of both coming from similar cultures and economic conditions and existing within security states. One even finds that their chants poke at similar societal issues and concerns, such as widespread corruption and lack of hope for youth. That being said, understanding North African football culture has been immensely important to understanding Egyptian culture.

Additionally, the Moroccan experience sheds light on how the Egyptian state could have handled the Ultras question differently. One can even say that the existence of an Egyptian Ultras group is a consequence of the phenomenon taking root in Algeria and Morocco. There's currently no consensus over the first Ultras group in an Arab country, but what is known is that they appeared as fully formed groups in Algeria and Morocco before Egypt. Ultras groups had existed for decades before their emergence in Egypt in 2007, but appeared in Algeria in the early 2000s and in Morocco in 2005, showing that they were precursors. It is also North African groups that have had the

most extensive interactions with UA07 and UWK and that continue to show them solidarity to this day.

1.3. Challenges

While conducting the necessary research for this thesis, I encountered significant challenges. Due to the current state of political freedom in Egypt, conducting interviews has been difficult. Individuals were hesitant to share their experiences and testimonies, even with guarantees of anonymity, for fear of being targeted by the security apparatus. Accordingly, I relied heavily on the qualitative data found in earlier scholarship. Nonetheless, I was able to obtain a limited number of testimonies, which I mainly used to gather information not found in previous studies. I did expand slightly on the issues previously covered. Still, the issues I wished to collect qualitative data on were the swelling in Ultras membership in 2011, the motivations of newcomers, and how the organization accommodated them. Given the limitations, I tried using each source as efficiently as possible.

Another significant challenge was the lack of sources on smaller Ultra organizations. In the struggle with the state, UA and UWK were constantly the organizations at the forefront. There were many smaller groups, but it is difficult to tell how developed they were and how involved they were in the struggle. Nonetheless, only Al-Ahly and Al-Zamalek had the large and diverse fandoms that are necessary to produce the organizational structure that is investigated in this paper. This doesn't mean that they weren't significant, but maybe they weren't given a chance to develop fully, and they were still stuck in an early stage where they were small-scale imitations of the larger organizations.

Since UA07's Facebook page was deleted, their official statements are no longer directly accessible. The page was the primary means by which the organization communicated with the public. Consequently, I have had to rely on the statements found in the literature or relayed through news outlets. Yet, it is possible that many statements and positions were lost with the archives. For example, many lost recruitment posts revealed the mechanisms used and the necessary conditions to join.

I was only able to access one of these posts since it was used in a televised segment in 2012.

1.4. Chapters

I divided this thesis into six chapters, including an introduction and a conclusion. In the second chapter, I discuss the origins of Egyptian Ultras organizations and analyze their structure. I focus on how UA07 and UWK managed to expand quickly, how they assign tasks, and how they replace their leaders. Additionally, I explore how this structure developed, explaining that it was a direct result of the stadium's space, which enabled people from different backgrounds to interact, and the unique nature of Egyptian football fandom, which centered around two teams. I also examine how this led to Ultras groups emerging as rhizomes. Finally, I provide a timeline of the conflict between the state and the Ultras, highlighting how the state's attitude toward them shifted over time and the different methods it used to undermine and dismantle them. I pay particular attention to the Port Said incident, emphasizing its deliberate and premeditated nature.

In Chapter Three, I elucidate how the Ultras organization was different from other youthful groups during the 2011 uprising and how this structure helped them to fare differently against the regime's pressures. To fully uncover this, I discuss the organizational crisis facing Egyptian society after Mubarak's departure, when the revolutionary camp failed to produce any leadership or sustainable alliances, and its historical and political origins. I discuss how this crisis resulted from how the Egyptian state governed and how Egyptian society modernized. Lastly, I track some of the influences that Ultras groups had on political movements in Egypt. More importantly, I track the emergence of rhizomic movements across the political landscape post-2011, especially among Islamists.

In Chapter Four, I discuss the historical relationship between the Egyptian state and football to reveal the importance and centrality of the space that Ultras groups took over. I discuss how football, from Nasser's era, became an extension of the state, and not just its votary. I discuss how government policies altered the space and how Ultras groups interacted with it. I also touch upon how cronyism in football created powerful

enemies for the Ultras and made simple non-political demands cause violent outbursts by state actors. Lastly, I discuss the novel directions the current regime is taking football, as they break away from historic ones, and how this affects the future of Egyptian fan culture.

Lastly, in Chapter Five, which is relatively shorter, I elucidate on some specific points that differentiate between Ultras organizations and other movements and organizations, in terms of mobilization, repertoire, and ideological appeal. This isn't limited to youth movements, but extends to other older, well-entrenched organizations and the state itself. Importantly, I seek to answer why their ideology was effective in countering the state's ideology, while competing ideologies fell short.

CHAPTER II

RHIZOMIC ORIGIN

2.1. Origin of Egyptian Ultras

In Egypt, Ultras groups are fan organizations created by youth to support their football teams. They do so by following their club's team around, hosting shows in the stadium's stands, and creating art. The first formation of an Ultras in Egypt was inspired by similar movements in Europe, particularly in Italy. Egypt's largest Ultras was Ultras Ahlawy (UA07), was founded to support Al-Ahly, the most popular Egyptian football team. The most agreed-upon origin story is that UA07's founder, Assad, was a student at Bologna University in Italy, where he experienced the local fan culture. Inspired by his experience, upon his return to Cairo, he decided to start a fan group with a few of his friends(Close, 2019). It's unclear if UA07 or Zamalek's Ultras White Knights (UWK) appeared first, since they both appeared around the same time in 2007, and both claim to have been first.

UA07 didn't appear out of nowhere; instead, when it was forming, its founders relied on existing online groups and chat rooms that had existed for about a decade earlier, for recruitment. A group formed through online forms called Ahly Lovers Union (ALU) that had some minor presence in stadiums with banners and terrace shows, which was precursor to UA07(Woltering, 2013). That is to say, UA07 wasn't the first attempt by Al Ahly fans to organize. The newly founded UA07 addressed many of the fans' complaints regarding games lacking flair and being lackluster compared to European games. Quickly, disgruntled fans began flocking to the group, imitating European football culture. UA07 and UWK had imported the structure, activities, and cultural aspects, without the political leaning of Italian Ultras groups, particularly fascism. Instead, they had a relatively apolitical stance, emphasizing only common ideologies, such as nationalism.

The distribution of support for football teams in Egypt is relatively uncommon. Despite the existence of many different teams, most of the population supports either the unquestionable favorite, Al-Ahly, or the runner-up, Al-Zamalek. Historically, those teams have dominated the Egyptian league, with other teams seldom standing a chance. So much so that many teams are less prevelant in their localities than the two popular clubs. Furthermore, about half of the Premier League teams don't have a regular fandom at all. Only a handful of teams have local fan bases, such as Ghazl Al-Mahalla in Al-Mahalla Al-Kubra and Al-Itihad in Alexandria. There are historical and political reasons behind this dichotomy, which is discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

Additionally, this unique support distribution led to Egyptian Ultras organizations developing in a fashion distinct from their European and North African counterparts. Not much is inferred about an individual from knowing if they support Al-Ahly or Zamalek, not even which region they are from. Support for one or the other generally stems from the leanings of one's parents or their childhood experiences(Ibraheem, 2015).

UA07 essentially set the path for the other groups. In their inception, the group imported a lot of its lingo and practices from the Italian Ultras culture. The word "ultras" itself is taken directly from Italian, where it originally meant "beyond" or "extreme." Nonetheless, the Ultras culture began to develop a distinct local culture, out of which an "Ultras ideology" emerged. It isn't easy to define what this ideology is, as it often means different things to different members, but generally, it is to make being a fan of a club a central part of one's identity. Ultras culture emphasizes core values, including but not limited to freedom, justice, fraternity, and dignity. This was part of their larger code that laid out how members ought to carry themselves (Gibril, 2015). Ultras organizations provided an outlet for youth who had few prospects and means of self-expression. It's important to note that during the height of the Ultras' presence, 62% of the population was under the age of 29 (Elkelani, 2015). Thus, even if they only appealed to youth, their target audience was most of the population. Those ideas resonated with many youths all over Egypt, who quickly started forming their groups. Even though their primary concern was football, Ultras fans would still attend games held by their club for other sports, such as handball and basketball.

Although there were many Ultras groups, this study mainly focuses on UA07 and UWK. That is because they are the main groups that found themselves at odds with the state and were large enough to develop and implement new organizational structures. Most of the smaller groups dissipated when the state began to lean down. A few lasted for a few years but were forced to disband, such as Al-Itihad's Ultras Green Magic, which officially disbanded in 2018(Jazzar, 2018). Additionally, as previously mentioned, there are few resources on smaller organizations. While smaller groups didn't receive a lot of media coverage, coverage is abundant on the UA07 and UWK. Lastly, UA07 will is given more attention than UWK. After all, its struggle against the state was longer, with many more incidents; it was the dominant group that trailblazed for all the others, and it was vastly larger than all the others.

2.2. Structure of UA07 and UWK

One UWK official described their organization as "a large circle with a center. Within this circle are smaller circles, whose closeness and distance from the center define their capacity to interfere in the decision-making process." He goes on to explain the factors that grant individuals easier access to the process, including administrative experience, seniority, creativity, and availability (Elgohari, 2013b). In straightforward terms, it explains the basic structure of the Ultras organizations. This exposes the flexibility of these organizations, as the different factors that dictate a person's role are constantly in flux, and members are always moving closer and farther away from the center. It would be almost impossible to draw a static map of each organization, as the sections and individuals that are most important are constantly replaced.

There is only one essential requirement to join the Ultras: being a fan of their team(Ibraheem, 2015). No secretive or laborious process was required to enter. On the contrary, Ultras Facebook groups would openly post phone numbers for each section and a set time and location for initiation(*الغندور انا انضميت لالتراس اهلاوي ومحدش ياخد مني اتاوة*, 2012). The low barrier to entry allowed individuals to join easily and to leave just as swiftly if they didn't align with the Ultras' ideology. Once involved, individuals could gain more recognition in their sections by earning the favor of the Capos. This was typically achieved through two primary methods: demonstrating unwavering

commitment to the collective and contributing creative ideas to support the Ultras and their cause further. Every member was encouraged to be as creative as possible.

Furthermore, the basic chain of command within each section ensured the quick implemented of these ideas. As a result, new blood was continuously introduced, preventing any stagnation within the organization. In a way, every active member was preparing for leadership; each new member was a potential capo.

Capos and active members take on many tasks, the most important of which are collecting funds, planning performances, and logistical organization. Importantly, the Ultras organizations are self-sustaining; they raise funds from their members, who pay a membership fee, and from selling merchandise(Taha, 2015), which helps them avoid economic pressures. Since their inception, UA07 and UWK, even before they got caught up in political battles, had a policy against receiving outside funding. All the intricate logistical organization was fully displayed in the stadium, where they performed impressive tifos and pyro shows. To the onlookers, it was unbelievable that a group of teenagers and young adults could accomplish such impressive logistical feats. Pulling off tifos was a result of creative and logistical planning, quick and efficient dissemination of information, secrecy among a large group, and flexible means of collecting funds.

It is important to note that despite the organizations' flexibility, prominent and charismatic leaders still influenced them. This concern was less pronounced within UA07. Given the sheer size of the organization, it never faced a shortage of capable and charismatic new up-and-coming capos. Accordingly, No single arrest or passing of a charismatic leader hampered UA07’s functions. In contrast, smaller Ultras organizations were more susceptible to having their functions obstructed by such events. For example, Ultras Red Devils (UA07’s Alexandrian offshoot) never recovered from the loss of their leader, Mahmoud Ghandour, who died in the 2012 Port Said incident. UA07 itself didn’t have a significant foothold in Alexandria due to the popularity of local teams. In the case of UWK, one leader, Sayed ‘Moshagheb’ Faheem, was able to steer the entire organization. The charismatic and controversial Moshagheb, who was a UWK founder, managed to oust the other founders of UWK

and set the organization on a collision course with the state(Close, 2019). It appears that only UA07 was large enough to be (mostly) immune to takeovers.

There isn't enough information on smaller Ultras organizations. Still, it wouldn't be far-fetched to assume that many of them never reached the point where they can fully take on the state or sometimes even eclipse existing fan associations. For example, in Alexandria, it is doubtful that Ultras Green Magic, which supports Al-Ittihad, the third most popular team in the country, was ever able to entirely eclipse the existing fan association, which has close ties to the security apparatus. For other teams, with a limited number of fans, their "Ultras" groups didn't develop distinct organizational structures, as they were often made up of local friends and fan groups that existed before the establishment of the groups.

2.3. State Violence

Since the establishment of the Egyptian Republic in 1953, the Egyptian state has rarely used open lethal violence as a first resort. The state swiftly resorted to such measures in two main contexts: the first was against militant insurgencies, such as Al-Jama'a Al-Islamiyya's insurgency in the 1990s and the Islamic State's insurgency in Sinai in the 2010s, and the second was against unorganized mass protests, such as the 1977 Bread riots and the 2011 uprising. Otherwise, the Egyptian state normally resorted to other non-lethal options when dealing with unfavorable movements, organizations, and communities. It is important to note that the state often uses violence against all types of groups, but it is generally non-lethal, discounting the contexts discussed thus far. It is important to note that this research is concerned with the Egyptian state's toolkit up until 2013, when the state started ramping up its violence and showing less tolerance toward different oppositional groups. This section will explore some of the various tools that the government uses typically to deal with movements (not necessarily political) and forms of organization.

The first type of group is organized tribes and clans. This type is particularly critical because tribal ties, which aren't tied to the state, are naturally antithetical to the uniting national identity. In Egypt, this is particularly important because the government has often faced issues with legitimacy and having to coerce consent from the masses. Two

main tribal groups are of concern in this context: the Bedouin tribes in Sinai and the tribes in Upper Egypt.

2.4. Timeline

2.4.1. Pre-2011

Before the emergence of Ultras movements, football teams had Football Associations (FAs). FAs were fan organizations, established by their respective clubs' boards, that support and create traction for their teams. These associations were almost entirely controlled and funded by the club boards(Elgohari, 2013a). Predictable and docile, FAs faced no issues with law enforcement; instead, they had maintained a positive relationship with them. Ultras organization thus started as an alternative to FAs, one that's free from the control of the club managers. From early on, Ultras organizations believed that "football is for the fans" and that organizations that had political and economic incentives shouldn't control it. The first realization of this ideology was freeing the fans from said constraints. From their inception, the Ultras were at odds with the management of the clubs they supported, and by extension with the security forces that had previously been at peace with the docile and controlled fandoms. From the outset, the clubs and the security forces united against the Ultras youth.

From the beginning, the Ultras ideology was inherently revolutionary and anti-authoritarian; the very existence of an Ultras group was a shift away from the status quo. Unsurprisingly, the security apparatus met them with force, like any other group at the time that organized unauthorized large gatherings. Authorities quickly utilized their standard toolkit: arbitrary short-term arrests, violent clashes, surveillance, and limiting access. Nonetheless, with the Ultras movement not taking its final form yet and the government still unfamiliar with their potential, they were given some leeway that isn't offered to other movements that mobilize the masses. This occurred during a period of heavy reliance on football as a propaganda tool to incite and control the population and promote presidential hopeful Gamal Mubarak, a topic which will be discussed in further detail later in the paper. One resident of Downtown Cairo told me that before 2011, Ultras youth were allowed to rally in Tahrir for celebrations late into the night, which was unprecedented during Mubarak's reign.

From the early days, UA07 captured national attention through their courtside shows, known as dakhlas or tifos, which showcased their organizational and logistical abilities. From their terraces, Ultras members would compile large displays, created by individuals holding coordinating sheets that formed an image or produced massive photos or models. These tifos would often be interactive and numerous during each game. Pulling off these stunts required coordination between thousands of individuals who had to be in sync at every moment. Usually labor-intensive, Ultras members would frequently show up at stadiums hours in advance to set up for these dakhlas (Rommel, 2021). Ultras groups used these shows as a form of self-expression and entertainment for other fans. Through them, they expressed their opinions on sports, their clubs, rival clubs, politics, and media. This ritual is vital for every Ultras group and represents the culmination of a massive group effort, bonding all members. The general population and the state were in awe that “kids" could pull off such intricate stunts.

Additionally, when tifos were displayed, they were imposing, capturing the attention of attendees and frequently making it onto television. The fact that they were broadcast nationwide provided Ultras groups a chance to send a message to the entire population. Furthermore, this meant that insulting a public figure wasn’t just a minor incident but rather ridiculing in front of the whole nation.

Shortly after their formation, UA07 began engaging in violent clashes with authorities. It was in 2008 that conflicts started between UA07 and the police. At first, these incidents were minor, often caused by police trying to seize the group’s flags and banners, as happened in a match between Al-Ahly and Al-Ismaily and another between Al-Ahly and Itihad Al-Shorta, both in 2008(Ibraheem, 2015). These were minor skirmishes, and the worst outcome for Ultras members was being detained and kept in locker rooms for the duration of the game. As these confrontations grew more intense, both sides became more aggressive, and the consequences increasingly severe. In May 2009, upset over the arrest of two capos, UA07 members attacked a police vehicle and vandalized bathrooms near the stadium. After this event, the police increased their efforts. In a subsequent match in Asyut, several individuals were arrested and held for nearly two weeks. However, police rarely used excessive violence against them during Mubarak’s rule.

For about half a decade before the revolution, Ultras groups were allowed some space to function, even if heavily policed and subject to constant victimization. The state treated them as potential tools that it could mold to fit into its apparatus, but year after year, they were resilient to the state's attempts. Nonetheless, nothing occurred during these years that prompted the state to take extreme measures to entirely and irreversibly subdue them. This all changed with the arrival of the 2011 revolution. Contrary to what is often assumed, Ultras groups' official position in 2011 was neutrality, leaving members to act individually as they saw fit. This is understandable, given the diversity of their bases and their exclusive dedication to football. After all, there was no prerequisite for joining other than being a team fan, without any emphasis on other ideological beliefs. However, given the nature of the Ultras ideology, it was natural for it to attract those who challenged authority and were willing to go head-to-head with it. Ultras members who joined the ranks of the revolution did so of their own accord.

2.4.2. January 25th Revolution

It was during the revolution that the Ultras group's notoriety skyrocketed. The revolution was initially led by well-to-do youth from middle and upper-middle-class backgrounds. As can be inferred, those youth previously had no experience clashing with the security apparatus. Ultras members, on the other hand, especially from Ultras Ahlawy, have had multi-year experience dealing with stadium security. In Tahrir Square, Ultras members worked to defend other protesters and repel attackers(Close, 2019). Their efforts were on full display on February 2nd during the clashes known as the "Battle of the Camel." On said day, regime-backed *baltgaiya* (thugs) attacked protestors on the backs of camels. The clashes started at midday and continued until late into the night. During the whole ordeal, Ultras members were on the frontline defending the square. It was on that day that they started gaining widespread popularity for being defenders of the revolution. For the rest of the uprising, Ultras members were present in Tahrir Square to defend the sit-ins. This is also when the regime began to view them as a serious threat.

In the months following the fall of Mubarak, Ultras groups became a mainstream interest. They went back to their normal activities in the stadiums, but with a new

revolutionary fervor. Ultras members would continue appearing in some protests, but the group at large didn't participate. At the same time, they left their mark on Egypt's visual identity, as they covered walls with graffiti that expressed the revolutionary fervor and their ideology and way of life. At the same time, as many groups fought to get a seat at the political table, the Ultras didn't have any political demands beyond the general popular demands of bread, freedom, and social justice. This separated the Ultras groups from the other actors caught in rancorous political battles.

For the following year, Ultras groups expanded rapidly and saw a surge in new members. As the security apparatus began to direct its attention toward them, they became targets of massive media campaigns. The media and some club leaders instigated against them, portraying them as lawless thugs. A popular narrative that state-sponsored media pushed during this period was that UA07 was nothing more than a money-making scheme (akin to a pyramid scheme) run by drug addicts incentivized by making money off t-shirts and other merchandise. Sports pundit Khaled Al-Ghandour, who was a known supporter of the deposed president and his sons Alaa and Gamal, personally accused Ultras capos of making a fortune off the gig. He also claimed that one bought a car using with donation funds, and another purchased a coffee shop(EP News, 2012). UA07 officials maintained that they sold merchandise and collected funds from members to avoid falling victim to external influences. They even claimed that they turned down multiple large donations, including one from Gamal Mubarak himself, who sought to win over the group(A. Saleh, 2012). Some UA07 Capos participated in televised debates to defend the organization. Nonetheless, no incident happened in 2011 that would bring Ultras organizations to the forefront of national attention or significantly harm their popularity.

2.4.3. Port Said Incident

Everything eventually came to a head during the Port Said incident on February 1st, 2012, following a match between Al-Ahly and Al-Masry. Before the game, tensions were high between the fans of both teams, and violent threats were made against UA07 members, but what was peculiar was the media attention. In the weeks leading up to the match, media figures discussed the lawlessness of Ultras Ahlawy, and some,

including Al-Ghandour, openly predicted bloodshed. Even though there were serious tensions between UA07 and the local Ultras Green Eagles, they were still within the norm of the highly competitive Ultras culture. Never was there a clear case of an Ultras group condoning lethal violence. What was abnormal was the media attention and the apparent prescience. I will refrain from discussing the incident itself in detail, as it has been covered thoroughly in the literature, and many details aren't of direct relevance to this paper. Instead, I will cover the main events and relevant information.

On the day of the incident, members of Ultras Ahlawy had travelled from multiple Egyptian cities to support their team in its match with Al-Masry. Being in a rival town, local fans vastly outnumbers UA07 members. Tensions were high, as insults flew between the sides of the stadium, but there was nothing completely out of the ordinary. Against the hopes of Ultras Ahlawy, their team lost the match 3-1. Following the final whistle, many individuals from among the Al-Masry supporters ran toward the bleachers housing Al-Ahly fans. Oddly, the stadium security didn't intervene in the charge by said individuals. They climbed onto the bleachers and started brutally attacking the fans. Multiple fans were brutally murdered, some beaten to death, while others were flung from the bleachers. In the chaos, Ahly fans tried to escape from the nearest gate, which, to their shock, was closed and locked. This caused the fans to pile against the gate, and multiple individuals died from the jostling. This remained until the gate collapsed outward, allowing them to escape. By its conclusion, the incident claimed 72 lives and over 500 injuries.

Multiple suspicious details pointed to this being a premeditated event in collusion with the security apparatus. Following the incident, an investigation was conducted by a special investigation committee. Its initial findings revealed evidence that the incident was premeditated, not just chaos that randomly erupted. The committee primarily places the blame on the stadium security, which is from the Ministry of Interior, and Port Said's police, for which evidence indicates their prior knowledge and facilitation. This evidence included: not taking standard measures and precautions, allowing individuals to enter without a ticket or search, attackers bypassing two lines of security toward UA07 members without resistance, and testimonies of individuals warned to avoid Port Said at a checkpoint leading to the city. Lastly, the report revealed that the gate where significant congestion occurred, and many lives were lost, was closed just

five minutes before the end of the game. The report also criticized the media for stoking tensions before the match.

The Parliament dissolved before the final findings were published, and they never reached a public hearing. There was more damning evidence outside the report that linked the Ministry of Interior and the SCAF to the Port Said incident. During a court hearing, Hassan Abdel Rahman, the director of the State Security Investigation Service, admitted that all information exchange between the security apparatuses was taking place under the supervision of Military Intelligence since January 28th, 2011, which Abdel Fatah El-Sisi headed at the time(Saadeldin, 2011). In 2014, the Minister of Interior stated that not only the Ministry of Interior was to blame for the incident, but also other unnamed security agencies. Both testimonies indicate that the incident occurred directly under the supervision of Military Intelligence, which was under the command of the SCAF. Lastly, some of the culprits confessed that they were paid to attack UA07 members, and they weren't associated with Ultras Green Eagles. Additionally, a widely shared recording had a *baltagy* (thug) claim that members of the dissolved NDP (National Democratic Party) recruited him(Al Jazeera, 2015). The hiring of baltagiyya by state actors has been standard practice since the 2000s(Amar, 2013), which has helped security forces outsource work while maintaining plausible deniability.

Even if the report mostly cleared UA07, the damage was already done, and their name was tarnished. Even if they weren't to blame, as far as much of the population is concerned, they attracted instability and danger, making them less likely to garner public sympathy in the event of future government repressions. To many, they became not victims of violence, but harbingers of it, and youth associating with them were "asking to be victimized." This marked a new phase in the history of the Ultras movements in Egypt. For as long as they existed, UA07 tried to avoid political battles and taking sides, but they suddenly found themselves catapulted into a political conflict. Expectedly, the rapid growth of the movement ceased, and many recent members left. The rest of the members were caught trying to get justice for their fallen comrades.

Unbeknownst to UA07 and other Ultras organizations, this was the beginning of an assault to rid Egypt of them completely. Immediately after the incident, the Premier League season was suspended indefinitely. This suspension lasted for a year, but when the games resumed, they did so without fan attendance. For years, fans weren't allowed to attend, and when they finally were, it was in minimal numbers. This was catastrophic to the Ultras since they were deprived of the central domain that they dominated. Their very existence was tied to it, and now they were forced to function without it. During this period, many smaller groups failed to carry on, but UA07 and UWK persisted.

There was also an extensive, relentless media campaign that was launched against Ultras movements. This time, the media didn't just claim that they're a money-making scheme, but that they're tied to the Muslim Brotherhood. UA07 and UWK were assaulted on every front, and for years, they were embroiled in fights with the media and the security apparatus. Severely weakened, UA07 continued striving for justice, but little was ever achieved. In the end, with the regime ultimately unwilling to give up any of its own, no meaningful prosecutions took place, and the few that did were clear red herrings. For example, a person handed the death sentence was discovered to be a UA07 member who was a victim of the incident, not a perpetrator.

UA07 made their dissatisfaction well known through every possible avenue, as they constantly protested and appeared on televised debates. During interviews, capos reaffirmed their commitment to achieving justice through legal means and a lack of desire for violence(TheEgyultras, 2012). Dissatisfied with the court's proceedings and angered by the SCAF's complicity, they openly called for Field Marshal Tantawi to receive the death sentence(Salaheddin, 2013). During those years, the only games that Ultras members were able to attend were international games that had an audience. Their first appearance was a year after the incident, in an Ahly game against the Kenyan Tusker on April 7th, 2013. Not ones for furtivity, UA07's first dakhla in a year depicted the head of the SCAF, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, as a dog. It is also important to note that during this period, UWK expressed their solidarity and were adamant in their demand for justice for UA07 members, putting aside all differences.

2.4.4. Post-Port-Said

Port-Said was significant in that it put UA07 on a collision course with the government, but also that it forced them to present themselves differently to the public. No longer could UA07 afford to be apolitical when it was demanding justice, even if it hoped to continue being so. After being the revolutionary sweethearts for over a year, now the public, averse and suspicious of anything it deems *siyasi* (political), started having second thoughts. As they engaged in more and more *siyasa*, they continued losing public favor, which opened them up for further crackdowns with muted sympathies. Against their best efforts, UA07 and UWK couldn't bring back the old perception they enjoyed.

Even their old apolitical strategies, now viewed with suspicion, backfired. For example, UA07 tried to avoid taking sides in the political fights occurring in Egypt and chose to only focus on their own plights. When major protests broke out against President Morsi on June 30th, 2013, UA07 and UWK announced their neutrality, even if some members joined individually. This neutrality didn't bode too well with the public, who viewed this as a moment of fate where neutrality wasn't an option. Less than two years earlier, Ultras groups might have successfully maintained neutrality, but now that they were "political" actors, that wasn't an option. This even left them open to media attacks claiming that they were associated with the MB, a claim that would've been disregarded before, but now many in the public believed it to be possible.

During this period, in Egypt, the use of violence reached new heights and was normalized to unprecedented degrees. This was a result of the regime's attempts to subdue pro-Morsi protestors, which ended up being successful. In the following years, Ultras members were met by a regime that had little tolerance for protests and was willing to use open violence. During this period, the regime launched its final assault to destroy the Ultras organizations.

After years without access to the stadium, in early 2015, an Egyptian court issued a ban on Ultras groups. At the time, the legal consequences of this ban were unclear, since there was no official membership or significant properties. Undeterred, UA07

and UWK refused to disband and continued their functions, except that they became more discreet about their plans.

The last major fatal confrontation between the police and Ultras youth was on February 8th, 2015. This was after Ultras organizations were banned and after the use of state violence was ramped up in 2013, but before they officially disbanded. This confrontation was an attack on UWK, where the premeditation was more evident than during the Port Said incident. This confrontation happened during the first game with fans being allowed to attend in 3 years. It was a game between Zamalek and ENPPI, and as expected, UWK were present. Zamalek fans were beaming with excitement to see their team again in person. But as they arrived, they were only allowed access through one gate that could only be accessed through a narrow passage. Stadium security slowed down access until the passage crowded, and without warning, they attacked with tear gas and birdshot. The fans frenzied as they suffocated in the passage, and chaos ensued. In a matter of minutes, multiple individuals lost their lives, and the incident ultimately led to 22 fatalities. Some UWK members claim that there was a hit out for Sayed Moshagheb, who didn't attend the match after being warned that security was searching specifically for him.

Even though the 2015 incident was premeditated, no serious trial occurred, and security faced no consequences. This, and the case of the Port Said trials, are in keeping with the unwritten pact between the regime elites and lower-level security. Simply, security forces repress freely to protect the regime and its elites in exchange for absolute immunity at all costs(Mandour, 2023). Against all pressures during the Port Said case, not a single security member was ultimately sacrificed. In this case, the state, having already weathered the Port Said trials, unleashed heavy-handed techniques to end the movements and to signal that there are no longer any red lines. Following the incident, the leaders of UWK were arrested, and Sayed Moshagheb, who is still in prison a decade later, was blamed for the deadly confrontation. Additionally, multiple members were arrested in a sham case where they were accused of attempting to assassinate Mortada Mansour, the president of Zamalek, which was later dropped. Under the state's pressure, the whole Ultras phenomenon had come close to a complete halt, but the regime wouldn't be satisfied until they officially disbanded.

Finally, in 2017, the government passed what came to be known as the "Ultras" law, which imposed fixed penalties for certain acts in the stadium. The law was seen mainly as draconian because it assigned significant penalties for minor acts, such as a one-year sentence for anyone who participates in an activity as part of an unauthorized organization and at least six months for anyone who enters the stadium in an unauthorized manner. This law imposed severe punishments for all actions associated with the Ultras, making them reluctant to express themselves at all. Yet, against all odds, UA07 challenged the law and came out in a show of complete disregard to authority. In their final major tifo, on March 6th, 2018, during an Al Ahly match against CF Mounana, UA07 members raised a massive tifo spelling out "For Fans." The tifo would be displayed in 7 different languages, broadcasting their message to the whole world. The stunt was probably their biggest tifo ever, insulting the police who were unable to control the stadiums despite all their efforts.

It is unclear what happened after the "For Fans" tifo, but the state leaned down on leading UA07 and UWK figures, in what can be assumed to be threats of consequences more severe than anything that preceded. It was then, after years of pressure, that UA07 and UWK disbanded in May 2018, citing the need to "protect everyone's future." In addition, and to add insult to injury, UA07 came out with a statement that says that the loss of life during the Port Said incident was accidental, foregoing further demands of justice from the security apparatus. This seems to be in exchange for two things: no more targeting of members and allowing fans back into stadiums, which is a card that the regime held onto for six years. After disbanding, fans were slowly allowed back into stadiums, but under strict security measures and severe consequences for any display of Ultras motifs or protesting in any capacity within a stadium. Since then, there has been no significant presence of an Ultras organization in Egypt. After six years, the regime had reclaimed the stadium, but it failed to restore football as the propaganda tool it once was entirely.

2.5. The Stadium as an Exceptional Space

It would be helpful to investigate the background from which the Ultras emerged. In a highly segregated classist society, as is the case in Egypt, there are few settings in which different echelons interact. Mubarak's era witnessed the emergence of a new

middle and upper class, and it was during this period that segregation was exacerbated. During Mubarak's reign, Cairo's most notable expansions were New Cairo to the east and the 6th of October City to the west. The key feature in both is the prominence of exclusive gated communities, separated by broad streets. It is scarcely necessary to remark that many of the younger inhabitants of the affluent suburbs of Cairo have never been to some of the central neighborhoods in downtown Cairo.

Despite the exhaustive elimination of common meeting grounds, two main ones remain: compulsory conscription and the stadium(Naeem, 2021). Many Egyptians never interacted with their counterparts from different classes and localities outside of compulsory conscription. Still, these interactions are limited, strictly governed, and don't allow for free mixing or organization. In the stadium, Egyptians willingly interacted beyond the regular class lines and found a common cause that transcended their schisms. Upon the grounds of the stadium, the Ultras emerged. This fact was crucial in enabling them to be one of the few movements that transcended class divisions.

Additionally, unlike most of the teams in the Egyptian Football League, Al-Ahly and Al-Zamalek aren't "hometown teams" that only enjoy support in their localities. Both teams have supporters across the country, and which team a person supports gives you little to no insight into their background. It is in this peculiar environment that the Ultras organizations emerged in Egypt.

Not only were stadiums common grounds, but football itself was shaped by the Mubarak regime to be a neutral space, free of the divisions that split society. Essentially, football was made to be purely Egyptian, and if someone didn't like it, then their "Egyptianess" was seen as lacking. For example, in the 1994 popular movie *Al-Irhabi* (The Terrorist), football was shown as the force that made an extremist put aside his hatred and begin loving his fellow compatriots, regardless of their religion or beliefs. This aligned with the ethos Mubarak tried to promote, as an almost apolitical leader of the nation. Mubarak was portrayed as "the father of the nation," one who transcended political feuds (Rommel, 2021), which is why football specifically was a great space for him to reaffirm this image. By design, when Egyptians engaged with football, they did so as "Egyptians" with no other labels. This created the ideological

foundation from which the Ultras groups emerged, a belief that could resonate with all Egyptians, regardless of their different beliefs.

The transcendence of class and geographical divisions is evident in the diversity of neighborhoods that had UA07 sections, from affluent districts, such as Zamalek and Maadi, to middle-class districts, such as Nasr City and Masr El-Gedida, to underprivileged districts, such as El-Salam and Imbaba. Additionally, UA07 had sections in many cities other than Cairo, such as Asyut and Suhag in Upper Egypt and Mansoura and Tanta in the Nile Delta(Ibraheem, 2015). Of course, members don't completely shed their original biases by just joining an Ultras. Still, they automatically find a bond to build bridges between them and those they would normally never interact with. In "Ultras Ahlawy and the Spectacle," Dalia Ibraheem notes how some Maadi fans ridiculed Helwan fans. It is evident that the Ultras ideology often falters in everyday interactions. Hoever, the Ultras as a collective still manages to organize all its different members and get them to work in unison.

2.6. The Ultras as a Rhizome

Deleuze and Guattari developed the concept of a rhizome to describe non-hierarchical structures made up of interconnected networks that can connect any number of points. A rhizome, according to them, develops and spreads organically without having any central point of control. Instead, the rhizome creates nodes that function with autonomy. This is inspired by the rhizome plant, where the main organism is the root system, and the above-ground plant is just a shoot of the underground organism. Thus, the above-ground plants are unessential to the life of the organism. Furthermore, even if the root is cut at one point, the organism can split and continue living and proliferating. In "A Thousand Plateaus," Deleuze and Guattari list six principles that characterize a rhizome: the principles of connection, heterogeneity, multiplicity, asignifying rupture, cartography, and decalcomania(Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

The background described in this chapter allowed for the Ultras movements, especially UA07 and UWK, to emerge organically as rhizomes. Multiple principles constituting a rhizome developed naturally as a direct consequence of the stadium's environment. These principles explain why other indigenous movements failed to develop like the

Ultras movements. Additionally, as will be further expounded upon in later chapters, the nature of governance in Egypt made it unlikely for a rhizome to develop in any other space, but the existence of a rhizome would allow for the model to proliferate in said spaces.

The principles of connection and heterogeneity are described as “any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other and must be(Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).” Rhizomes can establish connections between things that are radically different, without having to alter them fundamentally. It creates connections between things that otherwise would’ve likely not connected. Internally, different points within the rhizome are different, even if they share some similarities. There is no point within that understanding can enable the knowledge of every other point. Instead, different points emanate, affecting neighboring points while being in turn affected by them. The stadium provided a common cause that united all classes and localities across an otherwise fragmented society.

Additionally, given the diversity of the individuals in the stadium, distinct forms of fan culture appeared, all of which naturally fed into a shared goal. When the Ultras movements emerged, they capitalized on both points by focusing on the shared passions regardless of background or political inclinations, and they incorporated fandoms as they were. Furthermore, they allowed for the intermingling of fan cultures, which combined to produce newer, more creative forms of expression that blend their diverse origins.

The principle of multiplicity, where all parts aren’t easily defined and unchanging, instead all are part of a constant process of change and connection(Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). In a rhizome, there is no actual example of what each node should be. In the case of the Ultras, this was made possible by the nature of the fandom for Al-Ahly and Al-Zamalek. From the beginning, no specific case exemplified the Al-Ahly or Al-Zamalek fan. Instead, everyone, based on their background, expressed their fandom in a unique way.

Additionally, each fan could potentially be part of the dichotomies that divide society at large; in this context, none of them mattered. From the early days of the Ultras, their

members held different political and religious opinions, which forbade UA07, for example, from taking clear stances on divisive issues, where almost every citizen took a hard stance. UA07 was only pushed to take divisive stances when one of their own was harmed. The first time UA07 came out in clear opposition to the SCAF was after their member, Mohamed Mustafa, known as Karika, was killed during the Muhammad Mahmoud protests(Rommel, 2021). UA07, alternatively, outside of football, appealed to general concepts such as freedom and fraternity. Even during the 2011 revolution, UA07 took no official stance, and members were free to do as they wished. It's commonly accepted that the Ultras Ahlawy members partook in the revolution on their own accord. Similarly, Ultras Ahlawy announced its neutrality during the June 30th, 2013, mass protests against MB President Morsi when polarization was extremely high. Very few other groups were able to transcend this polarization.

The fourth principle, asignifying rupture, is that even if a rhizome is broken or shattered at any point, it will restart either along its original lines or along new ones. Every rhizome contains lines through which it organizes and stratifies, as well as lines it escapes through when necessary. When the rhizome is heavily damaged, it continues to exist through different shoots and lines, which remain extensions of the original rhizome. Regarding the Ultras organizations, this may not be a direct result of the stadium's environment but rather due to the extensive fan bases of Al Ahly and Zamalek, which can exist in every part of Egypt. This principle was evident during the attacks on these groups after 2012. When they lost access to stadiums, they continued to find new venues to support their clubs and pursue their goals. During times when they couldn't perform unifying functions, they focused on strengthening faction identities. Ultimately, when they gained access to the stadiums again—against all odds—they reappeared on their old lines with even greater presence and intensity. Even after their official disbandment, it is very likely that more covert lines still exist, as reflected in some symbols used by fans today, such as the number 74 and appearances during international matches abroad.

The fifth principle, cartography, suggests that rhizomes don't follow a specific pattern or deep structure; instead, they build their connections as they develop in an experimental way that's hard to predict(Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The sixth principle, decalcomania, is closely related, emphasizing that rhizomes reject fixed

patterns and ready-made structures. When considering both principles, we see that rhizomes can't be mapped, only traced. Rhizomes are constantly changing in ways that can't be anticipated or predicted based on previous or similar structures. This was also the case with Egyptian Ultras groups. From the start, they didn't follow a similar path or structure to the European groups. Instead, they adapted to the environment they entered. For UA07, there was no set organization they adhered to; instead, they had fixed goals and rapidly changed whenever a new reality prevented achieving them. Over the decade they existed, UA07 took many forms. When they could operate in the shared space, namely the stadium, the organization focused on high collaboration between sections. But when that shared space was removed, the focus shifted to sections working independently. Again, when opportunities arose, collaboration was prioritized. Moreover, even though everyone followed the same code, each section developed independently, led by locals from every neighborhood. UA07 and UWK avoided enforcing a rigid vision on sections. Based on this, it's impossible to map the structure of UA07 and UWK or predict how each group will evolve, since each section changes in its own way, or how the organization will function once they reunite. Like a rhizome, Ultras groups succeed in having independent nodes that still manage to operate in sync when working together.

Based on what has been discussed thus far, the stadium's unique setup groups that emerged from it meet the principles defining a rhizome(Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). This space was exceptional, as other spaces in Egypt were dominated by class division that eliminated interactions between factions, ultimately occluding the development of rhizomic structures. Importantly, the space existed because of the regime's calculations and with its knowledge, which will be discussed in Chapter 4. This culminated in a rhizomic movement that the state is unable to subdue easily. Furthermore, although the groups emerged from stadiums, following Deleuze and Guattari's principles, they quickly expanded to other spaces and created connections that couldn't be easily tracked or predicted. UA07 and UWK promptly proved to be enigmas among other structures in Egypt. In the next chapter, I will discuss how Ultras groups fared differently from different youth groups in 2011 and how their structure allowed them to evade regime pressures that ended the other groups.

CHAPTER III

ORGANIZATIONAL CRISIS

3.1. Face-to-Face with Reality

By the dawn of the first democratic elections in Egyptian history, it was clear that Egyptian society was suffering from an organizational crisis. Besides the MB candidate, Mohamed Morsi, and the recently ousted regime's candidate, Ahmed Shafik, Egyptians failed to put forth any other viable candidates. Furthermore, no meaningful coalitions that can endure severe pressure emerged. The political scene was deeply divided, and despite how controversial and unpopular both candidates were, they made it to the runoff elections. With unfavorable prospects, voter turnout was less than half, at 42%. During the runoff elections, fearing the return of Mubarak's men, a large segment that supported the revolution reluctantly voted for Morsi. With a turnout of 52%, Morsi ended up winning by a thin margin.

During this saga, Egyptian society's inability to organize was fully displayed. Although given more political freedom than ever before, Egyptians quickly fell into dissatisfaction and political chaos. During the years 2011 and 2012, political factions were caught in rancorous debates and feuds, and their ability to pressure the state was decimated. The inability to project power was possibly best displayed during the attempts to reoccupy Tahrir Square following the fall of Mubarak. At first, this occupation was perhaps the most effective strategy employed by the masses, but it quickly became almost irrelevant. During 2011 and 2012, there were many further attempts to occupy the square, but none enjoyed widespread support, and most were suppressed and dispersed without the regime facing significant backlash. In a matter of weeks, the different political factions that thought they were finally able to make their demands heard found their voice occluded, and they were left with no possible recourse. In record time, the regime had successfully pushed them into obscurity.

During Morsi's short-lived presidency, which lasted only for a year, dissatisfaction with his government skyrocketed. Its ineffectiveness was laid bare for all to see, with daily power outages, limited fuel availability, and perceived attempts by the MB to lock other parties out of power. Yet, dissatisfied masses had to reckon with the reality: what alternatives are there? As had already become apparent, there were no other viable coalitions. Discontent, mass protests were called for on June 30th, 2013. Nonetheless, it was evident that the masses had no clear game plan. Echoed through the media, many voiced the opinion that "we need to topple the Brotherhood, then we'll figure out what to do after. But most importantly, we no longer want them." The military capitalized on the moment, and the establishment pushed for people to come out, resulting in the largest protests ever seen in Egypt. Wasting no time, the military officially overthrew Morsi on July 3rd and quickly ended the short-lived democratic experience. Soon after the coup, political freedoms hit an all-time low. The new military-led regime allowed for limited dissent, and the number of political prisoners skyrocketed. New draconian laws were enacted, banning membership in certain political groups and banning protests.

In his monumental book "Soldiers, Spies, and Statesmen," Hazem Kandil described the disintegration of the revolutionary camp. The youth, having too much steam while lacking organizational experience, failed to organize and splintered into different camps, all of which divided among themselves. Congruently, older former dissidents, recently rebranded as revolutionaries, fared no better. For example, there was an attempt to unite led by international diplomat Mohamed ElBaradei, former foreign minister and Arab League secretary general Amr Moussa, and the Nasserist Hamadeen Sabahi, under the umbrella of the National Salvation Front (NSF). The NSF failed to produce any successful initiatives; instead, its members ended up endlessly bickering among each other. Each one of the mentioned figures ended up running for the presidency independently of the NSF. This amounted to six candidates running against Morsi and Shafik. The immediate result, as Kandil put it, was "The tragedy was that there were 'accredited' revolutionary candidates, and the divided votes left the country with none other than the Jekyll and Hyde of Mubarak's Egypt: the old regime—and its alter ego, the Muslim Brotherhood(Kandil, 2014)."

Kandil theorized that one of the main reasons the military completely scrapped the democratic experience is society's inability to produce leadership other than the unpopular Islamists. To many critical parties, not just the military, having Islamists in power was intolerable to local liberal elites, who feared that Islamists would alter the liberal nature of the Egyptian state, to the anti-revolution camp led by the UAE and other Arab states. Here, I argue that this inability results from a government policy formulated in the Nasser era, which built on its predecessor's formula, to remove the means of organization outside the state's fold. As an extension, I argue that Ultras movements displaying a new form of organization that the Egyptian state is inept at dealing with or controlling, which started proliferating, was part of the state's motivation to launch a campaign to eradicate them.

3.2. The State Comes Before the Nation

Just before the dawn of Egyptian modernization in the early 19th century, the peasantry constituted over 90% of the population. The aristocracy and educated classes were primarily composed of non-Egyptian elites, mainly from the Balkans and Anatolia, who also represented the bulk of the Ottoman army. The average Egyptian had virtually no means of social mobility. Muhammad Ali Pasha provided Egyptians with the first significantly readily available opportunity for social advancement(Naeem, 2021). The new ruler, aiming to build a modern army, turned to the peasants to serve as its foundation. This reform, although resulting in an enormous cost to peasant society, which had its way of life completely altered, offered average Egyptians a chance to join the ranks of the newly formed army and later rise through its ranks. It is important to note that this was not voluntary conscription incentivized to attract recruits; instead, it was coercive and resembled serfdom, as it often lasted for over a decade. The conscription was so brutal that peasants would frequently resort to self-mutilation to escape it(Fahmy, 2010). For the overwhelming majority, their first encounter with modernity was through fitting into the ranks of a state that had just dismantled their previous order. This reality enabled the Egyptian state to mold the emerging society according to its vision.

It would be false to think that modern Egyptian society has ever existed independently of the state. Instead, it was always the state that organized society as it saw fit and set

the parameters for civil society. This sets Egypt apart from other states, where there was a significant struggle between the state, which vied to establish its dominance, and the existing society. A struggle that would typically end in a compromise. Accordingly, the emerging social contract vastly favored the state and disenfranchised civil society. Furthermore, the emerging state was being organized based on security. This started from the Pasha's attempt to establish dominance over Egypt and later to take the Ottoman Empire head-on. Soon after, another expansion of the security apparatus came by Prime Minister Nubar Pasha, under the guise of fighting banditry, which, before him making it a crisis, wasn't. Nubar's measures were seen as cruel, but the British administration found itself adopting similar, if not more brutal measures, to subdue the population(Brown, 1990). This quick rundown is to point to the fact that the establishment and the expansion of the modern Egyptian state came at the cost of allowing a free, independent native civil society from developing; on the contrary, an exceptionally authoritarian and security-oriented state was formulated.

It would be false to assume that Nasser's methods of societal control were purely his innovations or that they were brought from military methods that were previously unknown to society. Nasser built on the previous regime's tools and expanded many. As is known, states constantly seek expansion and don't usually willingly give up space to the population. The new republic was no different; if the monarchy had developed a society around the state, then the republic wouldn't willingly free the population from its orbit. Nasser, seeking to entrench himself and to counterbalance other forces in the state, created the Arab Socialist Union (ASU) as a Leninist-style organization, inspired by Eastern European experiences. The ASU was to be the "vanguard" in Egyptian society(Kandil, 2014). Using the ASU, Nasser stifled the political scene with an open policy against pluralism. The ASU set the tone for what is to come. Regardless of which direction Sadat and Mubarak took the government in, the political reality remained the same; the president's party monopolized political activities, and no alternative major political parties were allowed to exist. Nasser went further to crack down on alternative political movements and ban them from functioning, mainly the Islamists and the Marxists.

In addition to monopolizing the political reality and banning political movements, Nasser expanded the colonial policing policy of perpetual suspicion. Since 1967, the

state of emergency has been perpetually active, with it being suspended for less than 4 years in total. This law granted law enforcement a wide range of power, all of which stifled civil society, including banning protests, banning unrecorded donations, banning unregistered organizations, and allowing for arbitrary arrests. For all practical purposes, no civil society can express itself or organize without explicit approval from the state. It was the state that dictated which groups could exist and how they could manage. This is paired with a state of perpetual suspicion imposed upon the population based on information present on their IDs, including religion, address, and education/work. These key pieces of information gave law enforcement a quick rundown that helped them decide who could access which spaces. All this culminates in a limited public space and capacity to build movements not associated with the state, or at least without its approval and constant gaze. Even existing non-governmental organizations are often extensions of the states, as their ranks are filled with figures directly connected to the regime and fall in line with its agendas, as will be discussed with the case of football-related organizations.

3.3. Exception to the Rule

A limited number of large organizations slipped through the cracks, and those few were imitations of the state. The largest politicized organization outside of the state was the MB, which had hundreds of thousands of members, if not over a million. The MB operated similarly to the state, with a strict hierarchy and decision-making concentrated at the top. This organizational structure exposed the Brotherhood to pressures from the state, which is partly why it was allowed to exist. As is evident from the previous points, the existence of such an organization contradicts the anti-organizational strategy adopted by the state, yet the MB is an exception. Historically, the MB has been made illegal multiple times since the 1952 coup, and Nasser showed them little tolerance. However, things changed under Mubarak. He tolerated the MB as part of his larger policy that allowed limited dissent while cycling them in and out of prison and keeping them for when they were needed. For example, amid increasing pressures on Egypt to democratize, he allowed the MB to run in the 2005 parliamentary elections. The MB won many seats, which was its intended goal. This maneuver scared Western nations regarding the potential rise of Islamists to power if Egypt were to

democratize. Having achieved his objective, Mubarak excluded them from the 2010 parliament and initiated a new wave of crackdowns.

The MB's structure was very convenient for the regime. The state didn't need to exert much effort to subdue them; whenever its youth would cause a ruckus, all the state had to do was contact the higher-ups, who could instantly control the scene. Later, if the regime decided it needed to dismantle the Brotherhood, it knew exactly who to arrest. This meant that the MB was constantly exposed to the regime and was at risk of being dismantled at any given moment. Nowhere was this more obvious than right after Morsi was toppled, when the regime started a focused arrest campaign. Within a matter of days, most of the key players were arrested, significantly weakening the Brotherhood's capacity to organize and strategize. Within a year, almost all key players were gone, and within Egypt, the MB came close to a complete halt. Even when it struggled against the state and organized mass protests, the MB failed to come up with any repertoire that could meaningfully pressure the state. From 2013 to 2015, the MB burned all its cards in attempts to resist the state, but it only revealed how inept it was at dealing with the regime in the first place.

Even if normally an organization like the MB wouldn't be tolerated, it played key roles, beyond being a scarecrow, that were valuable to the state, such as balancing more extreme Islamists, enforcing morality, and embroiling the public in debates that distract from the major issues facing Egypt. Discussing its roles in detail would go beyond the intent of this paper, but this is sufficient to say that the MB provided value significant enough to justify the state making an exception and to express that its existence doesn't invalidate the rule. In the end, the state knew that it could dismantle the Brotherhood at will, while on the MB's part, its docility was demonstrated over the decades. The MB fully expressed that there was no reason for the state to fear it when it aligned with the military in 2011, instead of with the revolutionaries.

There are other structures that the state tolerates out of necessity, namely tribes in Sinai and Upper Egypt. Unlike the rest of society, tribes had structures that preceded the formation of the society that appeared in the 19th century, and the state had no clear means of dismantling them. To deal with this, the state sought to bring them under its fold, which was facilitated by the hierarchical structure of these tribes. To attain this

end, the state supported tribal leaders and factions to subdue the rest. The state often achieved this by explicitly giving tribal leaders official titles and positions and then having them function as actors of the state. By doing this, it partially decided who influences circles outside of its direct control. The Egyptian state was successful in injecting tribal authority with that of the state. The state here revealed its ability to take over old structures, integrate them into itself, and then reproduce them in a new image, but this wouldn't have been possible if those structures weren't already hierarchical. In all cases, the state knew how to deal with hierarchical structures like itself and ensured that it had enough leverage to keep them in the lanes it chose.

3.4. Rise of the Rhizome

In the span of a few years, Ultras organizations proved their exceptionality by being resilient against the regime's tactics. Beyond attributing this resilience to the personal characters of its members, UA07's structure was able to withstand the regime's assaults. For one, they diverged from the standard hierarchical structure that the regime was comfortable with. As hitherto mentioned, the regime was only comfortable with organizations it knew it could take apart at will or integrate within its structure, which wasn't the case with Ultras groups. There was no single node or individual that eliminating would seriously hinder the organization as a whole. In their normal state of existence, sections functioned independently and united with the collective during specific occasions. At worst, if central figures couldn't carry out their everyday tasks, sections can function independently and then join again when favorable conditions arise, or new competent capos can fill the necessary roles.

Before 2012, there was no shortage of attempts by the state to subdue them. Initially, the state saw some of its potential and tried to win them over, through intimidation and attempts to buy them off, but to no avail. When they refused lucrative offers by Gamal Mubarak and maintained that they aren't for sale, they were faced with smear campaigns. Withstanding, their numbers continued growing and smaller groups continued popping up. The use of limited violence and intimidation between 2007 and 2011 wasn't successful at slowing them down or winning them over. In 2011, UA07 and UWK shocked the regime when they emerged, not as a limited phenomenon, but as a significant movement that could indoctrinate hundreds of thousands, if not

millions, of youth. Watching how rapidly UA07 was expanding and how resilient it was to pressure, the SCAF decided to up the ante.

Rather than being a completely calculated assault, the Port Said incident was an extreme resort. Finding its standard tools ineffective and fearing unchecked expansion, the state decided to unleash chaotic violence. It gathered the youth, who were usually out of its reach, and unleashed a killing spree. The sheer amount of violence was indeed enough to slow down the Ultras organizations' growth and to put them for the first time on the defensive. Nonetheless, it wasn't enough to completely stop them or to stop the proliferation of the phenomenon. Instead, the Ultras' rhizomic model, which was proving effective, was being maintained and pushed to other spaces, creating unexpected connections and nodes.

UA07 and UWK's ability to weather multiple storms and to continue functioning despite being unable to access stadiums is a testament to the effectiveness and flexibility of their structure. From 2012 until their disbanding in 2018, they utilized their networks and connections to create new nodes and maintain internal cohesion and functions, even if they were unable to display anything as grand and impressive as their regular stadium presence. They continued searching for every possible avenue to carry on their functions, such as emphasizing section activities, attending club matches other than football, where they performed tifos, and attending team practices. All these activities existed before 2012, but they became more central to the organization's operations. Moreover, the most significant testimony to their resilience was their massive "For Fans" dakhla during the March 2018 CF Mounana match. After 6 years of repression and looming threats, UA07 appeared with their biggest stunt yet in open defiance. Not only were they still around, but stronger, more capable, and sophisticated than ever. Even after they officially disbanded and ceased their functions, it remains unclear if their networks persist or not. In theory, if given the opportunity, they can reassemble and appear in a short period, with little warning.

3.5. Proliferation

The organizational crisis wasn't lost on everyone. Among Islamists, voices started to appear calling for the dissolution of the Muslim Brotherhood. Among them was the

popular Islamist thinker Ayman Abdel Rahim. In a series of articles titled "Ma'an l'Halli Jama'at Al-Ikhwan Al-Muslimin" (Together to abolish the Muslim Brotherhood), Abdel Rahim argued that the MB was ineffective at dealing with current challenges and furthering Islamist agendas. He pointed to how the dissolution of the movement under Nasser was a net benefit to Islamists who adopted a non-hierarchical model to further Islamist agendas, not specifically MB agendas(Abdul-Rahim, 2015). What's relevant here is the alternative that he proposed. The articles suggested a non-hierarchical model, where independent networks of experts and dedicated individuals could work to achieve the different goals that "Shari'a" seeks to achieve. He argued that this would allow independent members to realize their potential and not have it wasted by the hierarchy. Abdel Rahim was arrested in 2019 and is still in prison, but before his arrest, he had amassed a large following among Islamist youth who turned to his thoughts after the disastrous encounter between the MB and the state in 2013.

The spread of Abdel Rahim's ideas can be viewed as the belief in the rhizomic model gaining traction among a significant section of Egyptian youth. This is a clear case of the Ultras model finding new ground among youth, drastically different from their base at the time. Many non-MB Islamist youth were openly trying to imitate the Ultras, especially the supporters of prominent Islamist preacher and politician Hazem Salah Abu Ismail, who was outspoken against the SCAF and the MB's attitude toward it since 2011, and has been imprisoned since 2013. His supporters started multiple groups that sought to imitate the Ultras, including "Ultras Abu Ismail" and "Ultras Nahdawy." Even in popular Egyptian speech, the term "Ultras" began being widely used to mean a hardcore supporter.

Another peculiar case of proliferation is found in the Sayed Moshagheb saga. While UA07 preferred neutrality toward the government (beyond demanding justice for their fallen members), UWK chose a more confrontational route. Moshagheb held "revolutionary" beliefs and was more willing to defy the post-2013 regime. Moshagheb, an avid supporter of Abu Ismail, was accused of raising banners in support of him during a match. He was also charged with being part of multiple Islamist movements, but the most credible accusation was that he was part of the "Ahrar" movement. Ahrar was an Islamist political movement founded after the toppling of President Morsi, which was an amalgamation of groups supporting Abu

Ismail. It is significant to note that Ahrar appeared after Abu Ismail was imprisoned in 2013. Ahrar, like Abu Ismail, was against a military-led government, but what set them apart from other Islamists was their position against the return of Morsi. Limited literature exists on Ahrar, but their organization shows several hallmarks of rhizomic organization, including the absence of clear leadership, the lack of a hierarchical structure, and the allowance for members to constantly change their positions and fluctuate in importance.

For the media, the ties between UWK and Ahrar were a godsend, since they sought to establish relations between Ultras organizations and Islamists for years. For years, they accused UA07 of getting donations from the prominent MB leader Khayrat Al-Shater. What is peculiar is the media's concern with Islamists adopting Ultras tactics, which they wouldn't be entirely wrong about. Moshagheb was transferring much of his Ultras experience to an anti-regime political movement, and Ahrar was quickly shaping to be an Islamist rhizome.

In the case of the Islamists, we see clear evidence of the Ultras' rhizome proliferating in entirely different places. It would bring great alarm to the regime, which was struggling to subdue UA07 and UWK, to see their models adopted more broadly. What would also be alarming would be the large number of youths who joined the Ultras in 2011 out of revolutionary fervor but left after the going got heavy. It would be difficult to track those youth, given their sheer number, or occlude them from using the expertise they acquired during their time with the Ultras. Another critical point to note is the explosion in interest in politics and public affairs among Egyptian youth in general following the 2011 revolution. From 2008 to 2011, interest almost doubled, jumping from 34.9% to 68.2%(Elkelani, 2015). It would be safe to assume that many Ultras youth would be part of this trend. Given the increase in political efficacy broadly among Egyptian youth, it would be expected that many Ultras youth would've become more politically active as they aged.

From the state's perspective, this proliferation was troublesome. It already had a hard time in subduing the few rhizomic movements that existed, and its usual tactics were falling flat against them. In no way was the state willing to deal with a reality where many organizations existed with a rhizomic structure. Furthermore, the longer a

rhizome existed, the more expansive and convoluted its connections became. When surveying UA07, the state never fully mapped it since it was always in flux and lacked a hierarchy. UA07 would be relatively minor compared to the new expansive structure that the state feared would emerge. In theory, the Ultras structure threatened to change the favorable reality that the state had spent decades, if not centuries, establishing and maintaining.

This proliferation is what pushed the state over the edge. Notably, the cases of proliferation didn't fully appear until after 2013, and the regime's full assault didn't manifest until it had entirely quelled pro-Morsi protests. At this point, it wasn't enough to limit the Ultras organizations' growth, but it was necessary to wipe them out and anything that resembled their model. This led to the more extreme measures, such as openly murdering UWK members, banning membership in Ultras groups, handing out extreme sentences, and passing the "Ultras" law. Ultras movements wouldn't be allowed to exist, even with limited functions outside of the stadium. Notably, the regime's victory was achieved, not through its normal, calculated measures, but through sheer violence.

CHAPTER IV

DISTURBANCE OF STATE TRADITION

4.1. Nasser-Era Football

Over the last century, Egyptian football has often been politicized, and particularly as a propaganda tool by the post-1952 government. Even during the monarchy's reign, Al-Ahly was politicized as an anti-colonial team when, against the wishes of the Minister of War and the President of the Egyptian Football Association (EFA), it played five matches in British-mandate Palestine in solidarity with the Palestinians(Close, 2019). After 1952, Nasser promoted Al Ahly as the anti-colonial club with an honorable past, which ironically helped turn Al Ahly into a team subjugated to the state's whims and agendas.

During the Nasser era, the state initiated a concerted effort to popularize football, aiming to distract the masses and provide an outlet for their nationalism and Arabism, thereby transforming the sport from a niche pastime into a national phenomenon. Furthermore, the state took over most sports institutions as part of its broader effort to create a new state culture (Di-Capua, 2004). Football was promoted through every available medium, with massive investments being poured into it. New stadiums were emerging rapidly, including the Cairo International Stadium, which opened in 1960. Additionally, football was emphasized through all forms of media. Its coverage expanded from occupying a fraction of a page in Al-Ahram newspaper to filling two full pages. Matches were broadcast on the radio and later televised, at little to no cost to the consumer, and channels made money only from advertising. As a result of socialist policies at the time, the official position of the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU) was that watching domestic football for free was an inalienable right(Rommel, 2021). Until recently, the broadcasting of local games lacked financial viability due to the state's policy, which has been changing in recent years, as will be discussed. The state captured the people's goodwill by providing them with cheap

entertainment. For a handful of pounds, any Egyptian can go to the stadium to watch some of the top clubs in Africa compete.

Nasser utilized football for several additional goals. In the 1960s, the state took over sports institutions, which Nasser attempted to socialize. Nasser had hoped that football could be a realm where he could present the success of his socialist policies. Furthermore, he used football as a tool in his international relations. He also used football to promote Arabism locally and abroad. He was behind the Pan Arab Games, which were a precursor to the FIFA Arab Cup during the presidency of Mohamed Naguib, Egypt hosted the first Arab Games in Alexandria right after he became president in 1953(Rolim Silva & Gerber, 2012), where the aim was to promote a vision of Pan Arab Solidarity and to posit Egypt as the leading Arab nation.

During this period, public figures began taking more active roles in football. Nasser himself was acknowledged as the honorary president of Al-Ahly in 1952. The public personality who showed the most interest and played the most significant active role was Nasser's former best friend and rival, Minister of Defense Abdel Hakim Amer, who became the president of the National EFA in 1958, a position he held until 1965 and again from 1966 to 1967(EFA, 2024). Amer was a passionate Zamalek fan and is one of the primary reasons that Zamalek rose to prominence as the number two team. Amer was responsible for inflating the club's budget to rival Al-Ahly's. He became so involved in their daily operations that he once prevented Al-Zamalek players from traveling for a game with the national team, which they ultimately lost as they lacked multiple starters, to ensure they could play in a club match in Kuwait(Atheer - أثير, 2024). He even appointed his brother Hassan as the president of Al-Zamalek, a position he held for a decade.

In popular Egyptian culture, it is often claimed that the reason behind the 1967 defeat was the preoccupation of military leaders, particularly Amer, with football. Regardless of the truth of the claim, it reveals how publicly involved state officials were in football. After this, this involvement never entirely ceased. Football, like many other institutions, became a place for corruption and the influence of influencial figures. This means that when the Ultras arose, they weren't just wrestling one of the state's most effective propaganda tools from its hands. Still, they were also embroiling themselves

in seemingly random struggles with influential individuals. Ultras' youth often found themselves in petty feuds with influential figures. Their revolutionary ideology and demands to make football "for the fans" put them in constant opposition to club officials, business tycoons, and state officials. This is distinct from their struggle against the state as a whole, but still closely related.

4.2. Is Football a Part of the State?

Nasser's arrival ushered in waves of nationalization across various sectors, including sports. The EFA, once independent, was effectively taken over by the state. The leadership of the EFA transitioned from being an institutional matter to a political one. Nasser established the Ministry of Youth and Sports, which assumed control over the EFA. Only regime loyalists or military officials were permitted to lead the EFA, including, as previously mentioned, Abdel Hakim Amer himself. To this day, the leadership of the EFA remains a political concern, often featuring figures with a military background in leadership roles. For nearly 20 years, from 1992 to 2012, military figures held the position. From 1992 to 1996 and 1999 to 2004, it was led by retired Major General Yousef Dahshoury(EFA, 2024), while from 1996 to 2000 and 2005 to 2012, retired Colonel Samir Zaher took the helm. Even today, this position is not determined by elections; instead, the president of the NFA is appointed by the Minister of Youth and Sports, who, in turn, is selected by the president. Furthermore, Nasser's regime took football teams under its wing, controlling their appointments and public relations.

When taking a close look at individual teams, it quickly becomes clear that the line between the government and football as an institution is vague. Half of the teams are directly owned by the state or by companies that are state-owned. State-owned Premier League teams include El-Gaish, Ghazl El-Mahalla, National Bank, ENPPI, Haras El-Hodod, Petrojet, and Al-Ittihad. Additionally, Law 77 of 1975 banned any act of acquisition by investors for football clubs(Y. Saleh, 2023), which solidified the state's grip on the league. Considering all that has been hitherto discussed, we can explain how some teams have been able to exist and maintain their position in the Premier League while having virtually no fan base or ability to compete with Ahly and Zamalek. Since the inception of the Premier League in 1948, a few dozen teams have

competed, while only five teams, other than Al Ahly and Zamalek, have ever won the league. Al Ahly alone has won over 40 times, and Zamalek over 10 times.

This brings us back to why the Al Ahly-Zamalek dichotomy, which, as previously mentioned, played a key role in the emergence of rhizomes. This dichotomy is mainly a result of state policy and actions by state actors. During Nasser's reign, Al Ahly and Zamalek had the backing of heads of state and growing budgets. Supported by influential figures, both teams could recruit top talent while other teams only managed what was left. The state invested little in the different teams it owned, leaving them to fall into disarray. Only a few managed to stay in the Premier League for more than a couple of years, making it harder to build a fan base.

Meanwhile, Al Ahly and Zamalek monopolized the fan bases as they dominated the league for decades. Anyone supporting other teams knew that even winning the league was just a dream. Additionally, since Egyptian football was influenced by cronyism and the whims of state actors, the sport's vitality was no longer a priority. From the state's perspective, as long as a few goals like providing cheap entertainment and maintaining a national team to rally the people were met, there was no need to invest more or develop the sport, which also kept others from gaining influence.

4.3. Sadat Era Football

Sadat (also an avid Ahlawy) was no stranger to politicizing football, but unlike his predecessor. Nasser, for almost 2 decades, used football to promote Arab unity and anti-colonial solidarity, but now the state's agenda had changed. The unity with Syria had failed, the 67 defeat had spread dissent among the different Arab states, and Sadat was preparing to make the jump to the American camp and abandon Nasser's balance between the USSR and the United States. No longer was cultivating unity and anti-colonial sentiment a desired objective, as reflected in how football was handled. Abandoning Arabism, Sadat instead redirected football inward. Football was utilized to enhance national unity, no longer tied to Arabism, and diplomatic prestige. This was critical at a time when Egyptians were in shock at the Camp David Accords, which were an ideological rupture from everything promoted during Nasser's tenure.

Luckily for Sadat, right after the 1973 War and Egypt's defeat in 1974, Cairo hosted the African Cup of Nations, where the national team finished in third place. Egypt also happened to win the 1978 African Cup of Nations, which was the team's most significant success at that point. Sadat attributed the success of the national team to a national victory that reflected his leadership. Moving forward, Sadat promoted every success as a personal triumph, a strategy that Mubarak inherited and used even more extensively. Specifically, these successes were attributed to the stability provided by the state's leadership. Sadat turned football into a tool for legitimizing his regime, which desperately needed support after the 1978 Accords.

Additionally, the national team's international success became increasingly crucial as Egypt's status as a regional leader was questioned following its suspension from the Arab League in 1979(Podeh & Winckler, 2002). These victories were used to demonstrate Egypt's sovereignty and ability to endure despite external pressures. Throughout his presidency, Sadat successfully fostered much-needed national unity and cohesion through the sport of football.

4.4. Mubarak Era Propaganda

Mubarak constantly attempted to closely align himself with football and the national team during his tenure. He frequently appeared at important matches and was closely associated with the team's successes. He relied on football as a common denominator among citizens and as a source of national legitimacy. He consistently used football for political purposes. He famously leveraged the 2006 Africa Cup of Nations, hosted by Egypt and won by the Egyptian National team, to divert attention from the al-Salam Boccaccio 98 Disaster. Al-Salam Boccaccio 98 was a passenger ferry carrying 1400 individuals from Saudi Arabia to Egypt on February 2nd, 2006, during the Cup of Nations. In the middle of the night, the ferry sank, claiming over a thousand lives. The disaster resulted from a lack of government oversight and regulation, coupled with a delayed governmental response. The government reacted more than seven hours after the ferry sank, and survivors weren't rescued until more than a day later. Egyptian Politician and Diplomat Mostafa Al-Feki attributed the delayed response to the reluctance by officials to wake up Mubarak, whose express approval was required to initiate the rescue mission(Mostafa, 2020). This incident caused significant uproar and

anger toward the government, which appeared to show indifference toward what had happened. The night right after, when many people were still lost at sea, Mubarak stuck to his initial schedule and attended an African Cup game(Rommel, 2021). The whole incident was quickly overshadowed by the tournament and its finals, which the Egyptian team won a week later. Mubarak spun the national team's successes as personal achievements, which served as a potent diversion.

One of Mubarak's most essential uses for football was promoting his son Gamal, who he groomed to inherit the presidency. Gamal Mubarak was attending football matches in place of his father and would follow the national team on their trips. This use was on full display during the 2009 violence that broke out between Egyptian and Algerian fans during the two FIFA World Cup qualifying matches. Mubarak's regime added fuel to the fire to divert attention from the nation's woes and to posit Mubarak as a strong leader who doesn't take "insult" to his people lightly. Gamal Mubarak attended both games, following which he gave a speech, subbing for his father. In his speech, he spoke as a national leader about Egyptian dignity and how Egypt is a major power "not to be taken lightly (Topol, 2009)."

The Gamal Mubarak succession saga partially sheds light on why Ultras movements showed tolerance during the late Mubarak era. While Mubarak's reliance on football was increasing, Ultras organizations were creating traction around football and revitalizing fan bases. As far as Mubarak was concerned, this was a Godsend if the Ultras were willing to play ball. If the regime could rally the groups, then the Ultras' popularity would directly benefit the state's popularity. Gamal attempted to capitalize on this traction and hoped to win them over by presenting himself as the representative of Egyptian youth. Before 2011, he repeatedly expressed support for the movements and discussed them in televised interviews. In 2012, UA07 claimed that they were offered a one-million-pound donation from the presidential hopeful in return for dedicating a *dakhla* to him and raising his image during the 2009 Egypt-Algeria match(A. Saleh, 2012). Against his best efforts, Gamal failed to win their favor. Their constant refusal to succumb to his demands helped grant them credibility after the revolution.

Contrary to the regime's hopes, the Ultras took an anti-authoritarian stance and refused to accept any of the regime's offers. But even more worrisome was their taking over stadiums, neutralizing their potency to garner support for Mubarak and his potential successor. Instead, Ultras groups promoted positions against security forces and called into question the regime's authoritarianism. They would use the state broadcasting to voice their opinions using massive tifos. Within a few years, Ultras groups were wresting football's potency out of the regime's hands, which was not lost upon it.

4.5. Post-Mubarak

In the age of the media and the internet, Egyptian football proved to be a double-edged sword. On one side, it was a trusted legacy tool to prop up the regime, rile up national fervor, and distract from turmoil and shortcomings, but on the other, it was a platform that unites the population and gives national and international visibility to the opposition. This was a gambit that, for long, the post-2013 regime refused to take. It would be impossible to tell how Mubarak's regime would've handled Ultras groups had it lasted. Still, the new regime, which raised the cost of dissent and made repression a necessity, wasn't willing to allow anyone who knew how to utilize this platform onto it. For this, Al-Sisi's regime endured hosting matches without fans, even if it laid bare its inability to secure and control the space. Even after the disbandment of UA07 and UWK, this fear was still on display during the 2019 African Cup of Nations, which was held in Cairo. Police securing of stadiums was closer to a military operation, with 100,000 personnel out on the street(Woltering, 2022). During the tournament, there was no sign of Ultras presence, but at what cost?

4.6. Petty Feuds

In only a matter of a few years, Ultras groups became the focal points on which the fandom revolved. In this rise, those youth could snatch a prized propaganda tool out of the state's hands. Furthermore, they sought to make "football for the fans," and resisted the efforts by the management of the clubs to control them and limit their access to matches. From very early on, Club managements condemned the Ultras, expressed their disdain, and refused to collaborate with them in any capacity. Even

when the Ultras organizations faced the most brutality, the clubs showed little sympathy and continuously aligned with the state.

Since Amer's direct involvement in football, club staffing, and their upper echelons, like many similar things in Egypt, were subject to cronyism. Across the sports-related sectors, we see individuals tied to the political and economic elites. This isn't limited to the club management and the EFA, but even sports media. Consequently, the Ultras making demands of the sport's community, and not the government, made them many powerful enemies. One of the primary motivations that a UWK founder cited behind the founding of the group was the unsatisfactory condition of Zamalek(AltahrirTvShow, 2013). UWK came into existence, making demands of the club's management and pointing to its corruption and back-scratching. From its inception, UWK was bound to quickly clash with individuals closely related to the state and willing to use it against them.

When we take a closer look, we can find cases of petty feuds. We shouldn't downplay the role of these cronies, as they were central to the regime's fight against the Ultras. For example, the former president of Zamalek and former judge, Mortada Mansour, was a central figure in the UWK saga. Mansour was personally invested in ending UWK and had a personal feud with Sayed Moshagheb. One of the most significant court cases against UWK was for an attempted assassination against Mansour, for which no evidence that it even occurred has been presented. Before the 2015 incident against UWK, Mortada personally swore on multiple occasions that UWK members would either be imprisoned or killed (CBCtwo, 2014) and that Moshagheb would be executed(Tawfik, 2014).

Additionally, many of the sports pundits who feuded with Ultras groups were directly related to the regime. This includes pundits such as Medhat Shalaby, who was a retired major general in the Ministry of Interior, and Ahmed Shobair, who was an NDP parliamentarian. There was a constant back-and-forth between these pundits and Ultras members. They would constantly level accusations against Ultras members, claiming they were lawless and dangerous. UA07 responded through their music, which would ridicule these pundits. The songs would be catchy and sung during rallies. Medhat

Shalaby, who was especially enraged by the Ultras and eager to see them go, had Al Ahly fans insult his mother in unison during an international game in 2019.

Cronyism made it difficult to discern where the state began and where it ended. Even when trying to stick to football and avoid political conflicts, Ultras members still found themselves in opposition to individuals who could call state forces upon them. Additionally, this made it difficult for them to find allies to defend them and fairly portray them. Accordingly, they didn't find allies in the media and club management, both of which were filled with regime loyalists. There were a handful of outliers, such as sports pundit Alaa Sadek, who was an outspoken supporter of the Ultras youth and openly criticized Egyptian security forces. Sadek even openly called for the resignation of the Minister of Interior. Even though he was one of the most famous pundits before 2011, he disappeared from Egyptian media and has been completely sidelined. In a dramatic moment, Sadek, who is now exiled, resigned live on air, right before he received an order of dismissal(2017 ,*أين اختفى.. علاء صادق؟!*).

4.7. Post-Ultras Stadiums

Since the dissolution of UA07 and UWK, the state has reaffirmed dominance over stadiums, but now it seems that the new regime has a vision different from its predecessors. No longer is the government concerned with keeping the stadium as a space for cheap entertainment for the population at large; instead, it seeks to increase its profits and open Egyptian leagues to investors. This was realized in two ways: opening clubs to the market and selling broadcasting rights. In 2017, Law 77 for the year 1975 was amended to allow for the acquisition of football clubs by investors(Y. Saleh, 2023). Local and foreign investors flocked to the opportunity. Large corporations purchased teams and named them after themselves as a marketing ploy. This scheme raised a corporation's name recognition and provided very effective marketing.

With the opportunities ripe, foreign investors leaped at the chance to get a foothold in the Egyptian league. Saudi Minister Turki Al-Sheikh attempted to buy Al Ahly at one point and later settled for Al Asyuti, which he renamed Pyramids. Unlike corporations, to Al-Sheikh this wasn't just a marketing ploy, but a way of shaking up the league and

building a competitive team. Al-Sheikh sought to expand the popularity of his team to rival Al Ahly and Zamalek, maybe even topple one of them, something people thought previously impossible.

The acquisition of Al Asyuti was significant in that it was a clear attempt to shake up the Egyptian league's historic dichotomies. The new owner went on to spend large sums of money to acquire top talents, the likes of which teams other than the top two could only dream of. Although Al-Sheikh is now officially separated from the project, Pyramids has enjoyed, and continues to enjoy, undeniable success. In the past few years, Pyramids has eclipsed Zamalek as the number two team, securing the position for the last three years. Nonetheless, this hasn't significantly altered the fan distribution. Despite the success, Pyramids still struggles to fill up seats, often resorting to offering free tickets, meals, and monetary compensations to attendees. The Ahlawy and Zamalkawy dichotomy continues to hold up, but it's unclear how it will fare if Pyramids and other foreign bought teams continue rising. What's significant here is the regime's willingness to allow foreign actors to change fan divides cultivated over centuries, signifying a shift in how the state views and deals with football. Notably, opening up the league to foreign investors was an option available to previous regimes, but all had refused to do so.

Similarly, the government opened the door for the sale of broadcasting rights, which generated revenue for its coffers. The deals started more conservatively, but quickly ballooned as they proved to be successful investments. This started with the EFA selling broadcasting rights in 2011 to Al Jazeera for LE16 million. In 2014, after the return of the league, without fans, Al Ahly and Zamalek were permitted to negotiate the sale of their broadcasting rights. Just a few years later, in 2022, Al Ahly struck a 4-year deal for LE660 million and Zamalek for LE280 million(Aboul-Dahab, 2024). All this reveals the new priorities set by the regime, which is seeking additional sources of income. Egyptian football had then turned away from the fans and more toward profits. This is an assault on one of the core beliefs that the Ultras fought for, that is, making football about the fans. It is difficult to foresee the future of Ultras groups, but as this is written, the space that birthed them in the first place is reshaped. At the same time, the grievances that attracted youth toward them are exacerbated.

While the current regime has moved in the previously mentioned direction, it hasn't completely abandoned how past regimes exploited football. This is especially relevant now since Egyptian footballers are gaining more attention than ever before. Several Egyptian footballers are playing in European leagues, most notable of which is Mohamed Salah, who is currently one of the top players in Europe. Never had an Egyptian footballer been this internationally popular, which coincided with Egypt taking part in the FIFA World Cup for the first time in decades in 2018, a massive success for the national team. The government has tried to capitalize on Salah's popularity by involving him in local anti-drug campaigns, highlighting a connection between him and the president, and attempting to link his success to the regime. However, the regime is navigating a tricky balancing act—claiming credit for the success of Egyptian footballers and the national team, thus continuing the legacy of Mubarak and Sadat, while withholding the services their predecessors provided to all citizens.

Current attempts to revive football as a propaganda tool with mass appeal aren't without irony. Although stadiums are now "open," restrictions on the number of attendees haven't been fully lifted. For years, only 5000 attendees were allowed in every match, and it's recently been raised to 15,000(Ahmed, 2025), still a fraction of what used to be given Cairo stadium's 75,000 capacity and Borg Al Arab's 86,000. Now, instead of offering football as a cheap commodity, a screening is required to attend matches, stadiums are heavily regulated, and subscriptions are required to watch televised games. The gambit is to continue using football for mass appeal, while turning the actual event and ritual into an exclusive and securitized one.

Regarding the current regime, all the material reasons for the Ultras' existence were eliminated. Stadiums are no longer relatively open spaces, interactions between classes have decreased, interest in politics has waned, and new forces are working to make fandom more diverse. However, Ultras organizations have shown the ability to survive and reemerge when the conditions allow. The legacy of UA07 and UWK persists, as fans continue to use their symbolism, like the number 74, and they remain widely discussed. Yet, it's too soon to determine if they or new groups will gain a foothold again.

CHAPTER V

ADAPTING REPERTOIRE

5.1. Repertoire for Repertoire

Between 2011 and 2013, one of the regime's main strategies was to blur the revolutionary will. The regime copied the revolutionary tactics and displays of force. If the revolutionaries could organize large protests, so could the regime; after all, a significant portion of the population was directly loyal to the regime. Regime loyalists included, but were not limited to, police officers, military personnel, government workers, and their families. This alone numbered a few million people with a direct stake in the regime and its future, not to mention the many other loyalists who did not benefit directly from the status quo. At any point, the regime could flood the streets with hundreds of thousands of loyalists. Similarly, the regime could support certain groups that opposed revolutionary ones. If there were anti-SCAF youth groups, the regime could create counter groups, and who could tell which one had a stronger claim to the revolution? Not only did the state have its usual powerful tools, but it could also imitate those of its rivals, ultimately weakening them and making them ineffective.

As previously mentioned, different factions of revolutionary youth attempted to reoccupy Tahrir, but they were utterly ineffective. This wasn't just because the numbers had dwindled, but they couldn't garner broad support that gave them legitimacy, and they couldn't get much positive media attention. Furthermore, they had no clear way to set themselves apart from the many other groups that were protesting, some even pro-SCAF. Effectively, the regime had quickly turned all standard pressure tools obsolete. From that moment on, it was only a matter of time before the popular collectives became irrelevant, even if they made statements and tried to reaffirm their presence.

During a time when political groups found their repertoires ineffective, Ultras groups were developing highly effective ones. Given their diversity, Ultras groups were much more in tune with the population at large. Political factions were no different from society, fragmented and disconnected. Islamists failed to realize how absurd their sententious rhetoric was to the average citizen. At the same time, champions of democracy and liberalism became ensnared in insular rhetoric that was unable to capture the fears and desires of the average citizen. Across the board, political actors found their rhetoric falling flat. No one could rival the state's ability to control the masses, play on their desires, and reveal their fears. Revolutionary actors often overlooked the fact that they were fighting an uphill battle; they warned the average citizen of the old regime's return, even as they feared the instability that the revolution brought. Ultras groups stood in sharp contrast; unlike the others, they were view as apolitical because they didn't have political ambitions and were connected to football, something seen as pure and nationalistic. They spoke the language of the masses.

The success of UA07 and UWK's repertoire can be seen in their ability to up the ante without facing significant backlash. Even though they sometimes resorted to violence, their cause was still one considered just and clear. Furthermore, internally, Ultras groups never faced internal issues because of their policies. Instead, even as they began being viewed negatively by the public, they still held internal cohesion, allowing them to persist against the odds.

5.2. Art as Repertoire

Within civil society, Ultras organizations could reach the masses better than anyone else, especially reaching the youth. Consumable art was central to the Ultras media presence. This art mainly, but not exclusively, resonated with the youth, who made up most of the population. For years, they were able to maintain their image against a far-reaching media campaign. Additionally, their ways of communicating with the masses proved highly adaptive and weren't limited to one medium or another.

Following Mubarak's fall, almost all popular musicians made revolutionary music. Most of the popular songs were produced by well-established musicians who weren't necessarily revolutionary. There did appear a few artists from the revolutionary camp,

but only a few caught on, like the popular band, Cairokee. Meanwhile, Ultras groups managed to create distinct music, born from years of singing in stadiums, that gained popularity among youth. Their music was in tone with the culture, but still different from the usual popular singers, tone-deaf revolutionary music, and outdated Islamist songs. Moreover, like their courtside songs, they were crafted to be catchy and easy to memorize. Swiftly, their songs became a staple in protests, where they sang in unison. Even if Ultras members weren't present at a protest, the Ultras identity was there in the chants that the broader revolutionary camp adopted. But to UA07, music wasn't just a way of getting good publicity and connecting to the masses; they weaponized it against their political enemies. For example, they had popular songs where they ridiculed famous media personalities(UltrasAhlawy07Media, 2012), songs that would soon be sung on the streets. Similarly, they made music against police forces, famously calling them "crows."

Another central form of art is graffiti. All over Egypt, Ultras members would use the walls to make their voices heard. This was a form of youth taking control of their areas; it wasn't only the businessmen and the government who got to decide the city's identity, but also the youth. The act of painting graffiti was central to the Ultras, especially since it was one of the main tasks carried out independently by each section. This helped each section develop internal camaraderie and set the identity of their own neighborhoods. Ultras youth from different sections would come together to paint more significant memorials, such as those around Tahrir Square. It was Ultras youth that had the privilege of painting around the square after Mubarak's downfall. Many of these paintings gained immense symbolic significance at the time. One of the state's more explicit acts of rejection was painting over UA07 and UWK's most prized and impressive murals(Radi, 2013), which sparked widespread controversy and backlash from pro-revolution camps. For a while, Ultras youth fought for the city's identity as they kept making more murals every time the regime covered them(Jankowicz, 2016). Just as Ultras graffiti helped express a specific identity in the Urban space, the removal of any traces of it has been central to the current regime's efforts to remove any memory of 2011(Hearst, 2022).

Ultras art represented an organic expression of the community that wasn't easily replicated or countered by the state. At the end of the day, it was art from the youth to

the youth, while the state's cadres were viewed as out-of-touch old men. Ultras were thus successful at capturing the attention of this critical demographic that had become most of the population. Until today, the state has failed to capture the passion of the younger generation, whose self-expression it saw as a threat. Instead, the regime resorted to forcefully banning this self-expression and repressing it. In a reality where the state is actively trying to shape the memory of the masses, popular songs and murals are seen as a threat. This also sets apart Ultras groups from other revolutionary groups, in that they were able to create lasting media that resonated with the masses. At the same time, very little remains from different groups. Here shines the lack of imagination that existed in the revolutionary camp, which fell into obscurity when confronted by state media.

5.3. Why is Ultras Ideology Appealing?

A subtle reason underlines the effectiveness of the Ultras ideology, which is that it is a counter to the state's ideology because, similarly to the state's, it has no deep commitments. Nasser, the founder of this state and its "ideology," was a pragmatic man who held lofty ideals but no strict ideology. Given that there was no ideology to indoctrinate his base, the state resorted to buying the favor of key figures and groups. This lack of ideological commitment kick-started the state's policy of pitting existing ideologies against each other. This is what led Sadat, who had no ideology to rally students around, to let loose the Islamists in universities to counter Marxists. A policy, although successful in its goal, led to Islamists dominating campuses for decades. Mubarak later didn't see any reason to change the equation he inherited; buying loyalties and pitting ideological groups against each other. Even more so, Mubarak, presenting himself as the father of the nation, acted like he was beyond ideology and political feuds, refusing to commit to any clear ideology. This was apparent in his policies that pulled on different identities when convenient, be it Islamic or Arab identity.

Until today, the main driver behind loyalty to the state is that it guarantees those associated with it power and access, which is tied only to it. While the masses who don't benefit directly from the state weren't appealed to through ideology, but through fearmongering and threats. Since Nasser's era, there has been no obvious ideology

pushed by the state. It's the "Arab Republic of Egypt," but republicanism never materialized beyond lofty claims. As Kandil mentions, Nasser tried importing Eastern European single-party politics, without the ideological baggage(Kandil, 2014), which left his followers in ideological limbo. Accordingly, ideologues haven't had much success countering the state's "ideology." Be it Islamists, Marxists, or Liberals, they have an ideology to sell people on, but they don't get at the fundamentals of the mass attachment to the state. They are trying to counter a non-ideology without an epistemological foundation with an ideology. Inherently, every political and religious ideology was antithetical to the state that lacked any. Ideologues thus never struck at what actually connected people to the state, and they even more so, never presented anything that could appeal to regime loyalists, the many that are loyal because they benefit or they have a tribal connection to the state apparatus.

Alternatively, the Ultras skipped the hard ideological sell and appealed to something that the masses are already attached to, football. Consequently, Ultras movements were able to appeal to everyone without having to push an ideology that put individuals at odds with the state. Ultras organizations promoted broad concepts that don't constitute a clear ideology, such as freedom, justice, fraternity, and sacrifice. Furthermore, Ultras were able to counter one of the main drivers of loyalty to the state among the masses, fear. Ultras youth were individuals who were subject to demeaning encounters with the police, with anger and humiliation being key features in their relationship. The feeling that the state treated them unjustly was one of the primary motivations for individual contribution to the 2011 revolution among the Ultras youth. Ultras organizations promoted bravery in the face of threats and allowed youth to be part of a collective that intimidated their oppressors. Always present in large numbers, their chants intimidated police. Ultras organizations provided their members with empowerment and fraternity that outweighed the fear imposed by the state. This is even more impressive when we consider that this developed in line with what the state was already promoting regarding football. Ultras groups had attached themselves to something that already had mass appeal and was seen as pure. When viewed from this lens, the state's policy backfired when it gave way to Ultras groups. This is potentially part of the current regime's reluctance to allow for genuine fandom to exist again.

Unlike with other groups, the state couldn't successfully discredit the Ultras groups as they lacked a precise political alignment and were connected to the pure national sport. Other groups were labeled as radical or malicious, but there was no clear target for attack here. This is evident in the media's shifting narratives, which kept changing because smears wouldn't stick. Initially, the media portrayed Ultras groups as money-making schemes, then labeled them as radicals, then as thugs, and eventually, the media pressure simply wasn't enough. Instead of directly addressing the issue, the regime chose to remove Ultras groups from the public eye, even though their broad appeal has diminished in recent years due to rising dissent costs. The level of fearmongering that had been effective during Mubarak's rule was no longer sufficient to control the masses, so the regime increased it multiple times. Nonetheless, the Ultras' ideology elevated the youth's tolerance for fearmongering without carrying the ideological baggage of traditional political movements. This made their "ideology" effective against the state's indoctrination efforts for a significant portion of the population.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The emergence of Ultras movements and their subsequent politicization was by no means usual; instead, it resulted from particular conditions. Historically, the Egyptian state has little tolerance for large organizations, constantly making sure to set parameters for the few that exist, or, even better, fold them into its structure, as it did with tribes in Upper Egypt or Bedouins in Sinai. For decades, the state had practically eliminated almost all spaces where Egyptians of different backgrounds interacted. The Ultras arose through a crack in the system, which was the stadium. The stadium was a highly exceptional space in that it functioned as a common space for all Egyptians, regardless of their beliefs, class, or origin. This space wasn't a Mubarak-era initiative but rather carried over since Nasser's reign. The maintenance of this space eventually proved costly, which is part of the reason why the current regime chose to end its exceptionalism. In addition to Ultras groups emerging from an exceptional space, football itself was promoted since the 50s as a uniting force that transcended all boundaries. This all culminated in the emergence of Ultras groups that transcended the regular divisions that are seldom overcome.

The unique nature of stadiums allowed Ultras groups to emerge as rhizomes, which is hard to imagine happening in other spaces in Egypt. This was also supported by the characteristics of Egyptian fandom, centered around only two teams, both of which had fans all across Egypt. This enabled UA07 and UWK to exist organically in various localities. The divide between Ahlawy and Zamalkawy resulted directly from state policies that have been in place since Nasser's era. The promotion of this type of fandom turned out to be a miscalculation, as it created an identity that went beyond local boundaries and united different social classes. When the nature of the stadium is paired with the characteristics of Egyptian fandom, it becomes clear why Ultras groups emerged as rhizomes, whereas other movements did not. From here, we can begin

tracing what made UA07 and UWK exceptional, which in turn begins to explain why the state had a zero-tolerance policy toward them.

There is no singular reason underlying the Egyptian state's decision to upend Ultras groups; rather, it is a composite of multiple overlapping reasons. After a few years of dealing with this new phenomenon, the state realized that these groups weren't the same as other social movements. Instead, the Ultras groups, largely thanks to their rhizomic structure, proved flexible, resistant to external pressures, appealing to youth, and rapidly expanding. Although there was an initial attempt by state actors to capitalize on the popularity of UA07 and UWK, they all failed to do so. The state continued to tolerate them to some extent, but their potential became clear during the 2011 uprisings. While other youth groups fell into obscurity, their popularity continued to increase. Unable to control or subdue them, recognizing their rapid growth, and embittered by their success in fighting back against police forces during the revolution, the security apparatus decided that the Ultras ought to end. Yet, since traditional strategies fell short, the state resorted to open extreme violence, fully manifesting in the Port Said incident in 2012 and the Air Defense stadium incident in 2015. It took the regime years of violence and repression to finally force UA07 and UWK to disband in 2018.

The uniqueness of the Ultras group manifested more clearly when contrasted with other youthful groups that attempted to mobilize in 2011. While other groups faltered, splintered, and couldn't adapt to the rapid changes, UA07 and UWK were able to adapt, build new coalitions, persist against enormous pressures, and influence the other groups around Egypt. Furthermore, while youth groups lost their repertoires, Ultras groups continued to find new creative ones. They even found ways to make their messages heard, such as music and graffiti, despite the media standing against them. Even if the press negatively presented them, even after the Port Said massacre, their cause seemed like a pure one. Long after the regime had subdued youth groups, Ultras groups persisted, and their displays of power only became bigger, the pinnacle of which was the 2018 "For Fans" tifo. The state's frustration wasn't unfounded, as half a decade of pressure had yielded no apparent success; instead, the groups clearly grew larger, more effective, and more cohesive. Their cohesion becomes even more impressive when considering that it was maintained and fostered in a time when they

couldn't access stadiums. It's still not entirely clear how the state forced them to disband in 2018, but it seems that they did so under extreme threats. Yet, they managed to disband as they saw fit, which means that their networks didn't necessarily dissipate, leaving the possibility of them returning open.

Ultras groups initially attempted to remain apolitical and avoid political struggles, but they inadvertently found themselves in them. They had initially planned to confine their activities to football, but unbeknownst to them, that alone was deeply political for multiple reasons. Most importantly, football as an institution had become a part of the state that served key societal roles. Notably, UA07 and UWK appeared at the tail-end of Mubarak's reign, when reliance on football to promote the president and national cohesion was at an all-time high. Had they appeared in a time when the sport was less relevant than events might have played out differently. To the regime, these youth were functioning in a space that was of critical importance. Ultras groups could have been accepted by the state had they played ball and collaborated with the state, but what they did was wrestle this highly prized tool for propaganda and societal control out of the state's hands.

Furthermore, cronyism had filled the ranks of everything related to football, including sports media, club management, and sport-related businesses, with regime loyalists and influential individuals. Just making simple demands of their clubs made Ultras members targets of powerful and well-connected individuals.

Contrary to what they hoped, they ended up making enemies left and right and seldom found allies in key positions. All this made their position in football, even with no direct political engagement, a highly politicized one that made them constant targets. Ironically, in its attempt to eliminate Ultras groups, the Egyptian state lost the ability to rally the population around football, which it still struggles to do, despite massive successes by the National team.

This study's findings suggest that the Egyptian state is vulnerable to alternative non-hierarchical forms of organization. The historical development of the Egyptian state has allowed it to shape the society as it so fits. Accordingly, it had only allowed the existence of organizations with hierarchical structures that could be easily and swiftly

dismantled. Still, it had not had to deal with non-hierarchical large movements before. When Ultras groups appeared, rhizomic organization proved effective against the state's methods, which forced it to resort to open extreme violence. This also came at a time when the Egyptian society's inability to organize against the state adequately was on full display, inspiring many to manage similarly to UA07 and UWK. This was most prominent among Islamists, and it is unclear how the state would have adapted to having many rhizomic movements spread out across civil society. The state's violent reaction was then a last resort to put an end to not just Ultras groups, but the new organizational structure they represented. The state did in-fact tackle the rhizome issue at a critical juncture, right before it rapidly proliferated.

At the time this was being written, Ultras organizations had almost wholly ceased to exist in Egypt. UA07 and UWK have cracked under the weight of the state, and as old members have already reached new phases of their lives, have failed to pass along the organization to a younger crowd. Yet there seem to be some signs of the continuation of UA07. Ultras members have been appearing in international matches held abroad, such as in Morocco, but are still not allowed to enter Egyptian stadiums. UA07 has also continued to release new music, keeping the memory of the organization and its martyrs alive. As of June 2025, new music was released by UA07.

Additionally, there have been expressions of solidarity from their North African counterparts in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, as a cross-border football fan identity continues to take shape. Many indicators show, though not definitively, that if given the chance, Ultras groups would rapidly reemerge. That is especially true as they are central to every conversation about the stagnant state of Egyptian football fandom.

Just recently, Egypt officially secured its position in the 2026 FIFA World Cup. This participation will help reveal the Egyptian government's position toward football, even more than in 2018. In 2018, the government hadn't fully formulated its strategy, as it was at the tail end of the conflict with UA07 and UWK, and the rise of international Egyptian football stars was recent. Since then, those stars have become more established, Ultras movements have ceased their functions, the Egyptian league was opened to international investors, and the government has solidified its grip on stadiums. Notably, this ascension to the World Cup has failed to create nearly as much

buzz as the previous one. In Cairo, this event was barely noticeable on the streets. Notably, this event occurred simultaneously with the announcement of a ceasefire deal in Gaza brokered in Egypt. That might have taken away from the festivities surrounding footballs, but still, no buzz can be seen, no significant celebrations on the streets. The state is failing to create buzz around the biggest possible National team successes, which revives the Ultras question. While the state successfully reaffirmed its control of stadiums, allowed international investment to flow into the Egyptian league, and allowed for the sale of broadcasting rights, excitement toward football has hit a low, bringing back the discussion for the need for an independent, lively fandom, which recently existed in the Ultras groups.

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