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Egyptian “Ultras” Crisis with Turki Al-Sheikh

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Since early 2018, the influence of Turki Al-Sheikh (Turki bin Abdulmohsen bin Abdul Latif Al-Sheikh, an adviser at the Royal Court under the rank of Minister, and Chairman of the General Sports Authority in Saudi Arabia, has started to intensify and infringe on the Egyptian sports defying the national feeling of Egyptians. However, Al-Sheikh’s influence has not been limited to sports but intensified over the public domain as Al-Sheikh started to build a lobby, including journalists, police officers, artists, and sovereign agencies officials, members of the Egyptian Football Federation, as well as his relationship with Sisi, which facilitated his “infringement”.

Al-Sheikh’s infringement on the Egyptian public domain, and his pressures on the Ahly Sporting Club in particular were behind the anger of Al-Ahly fans, more specifically ‘Ultras Ahlawy’ which directed insults to Turki Al-Sheikh during some games that Al-Ahly played, which led to the imprisonment of seven of them on charges of “belonging to a terrorist group” because of the security influence of Al-Sheikh in Egypt.

Ten days after the ruling of the Cairo Criminal Court on renewal of the detention of five of Al-Ahly fans on charges of rioting during the club’s game with Gabonese Monana club, during which the ‘Ultras Ahlawy’ shouted demanding freedom, and directed some insults to Turki al-Sheikh. Despite the reservation of the majority of Egyptians on such conduct, aroused a state of euphoria among the Egyptian people in general, which raised questions about the political role of the ‘ultras’ and sports fans, and the limits of mixing sports with politics. This paper attempts to present a view on

the attitude of Al-Ahly fans, particularly the 'Ultras Ahlawy' towards Turki Al-Sheikh within the current Egyptian political scene.

First: Framework of the Crisis

It is not possible to identify the significance of the behavior of Al-Ahly fans without standing on the environment that witnessed the emergence of the two elements of the crisis:

1- The ardent desire of the government to besiege the 'ultras' or fan leagues of clubs, and end their political role completely, and subject them to the power of the security services; which represents the basis of the Egyptian regime after the July 3 military coup.

2- Turki Al-Sheikh's infringement and extension of his influence in such a way as to challenge the concept of belonging and foreign dependency to Egyptians.

This requires shedding light on the crisis environment in the following two sub-axes:

a- Suppression of 'Ultras Ahlawy'

According to academics, there has been 'concern' and 'revenge' in the Egyptian State towards the 'ultras' in general, and 'Ultras Ahlawy' in particular. The concern is that the number of members of the various 'ultras' leagues has reached one million, as the third most powerful force in Egypt after the Egyptian Church and the Muslim Brotherhood. Revenge is due to the fact that 'Ultras Ahlawy' had entered humiliating confrontations with the Egyptian security forces in some games in 2011, including violent clashes between the security forces and Al-Ahly fans, as well as their role in confronting the security forces during the January 25 Revolution (2011).

The desire to avenge on the part of the Egyptian State emerged through the "massacre" of the Port Said Stadium, which witnessed Egypt's painful events in

February 2012; one day after the 'Ultras Ahlawy' chants against the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), which ruled Egypt in the interim period before Dr. Mohamed Morsi became President of Egypt in 2012 for only one year. The massacre was followed by a sit-in by 'Ultras Ahlawy' in front of the Council of Ministers Premises and inside Cairo University, and a number of likely presidential candidates at the time, such as Hamdeen Sabbahi and Abdel Moneim Abul-Fotouh, visited them, which drew attention to the political power of such leagues.

In September 2016, Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi issued a presidential pardon for Maj. Gen. Mamdouh Sheta, the main convict in Port Said Stadium massacre, a clash erupted between the 'ultras' and security forces, which led to the destruction of a security armored vehicle by one of the fans, which was followed by blocking the airport road by hundreds of 'Ultras Ahlawy', preventing passenger traffic, which represented a challenge to the State and embarrassed the government before the US Secretary of State, who was due to leave Cairo for Washington at that time. In addition, the 'ultras' used to repeat chants in favor of the Palestinian cause on more than one sporting occasion, which also embarrassed the al-Sisi regime before the Israeli administration. With the escalating judicial/security confrontation of the 'ultras', clashes between the government and 'Ultras Ahlawy' calmed down relatively, but they were renewed during Al-Ahly's game with the Gabonese club, when the ultras youth repeated chants against the Egyptian regime and against Sisi himself. During a handball game in March 2018, the security forces confronted the ultras, which led to the seizure of the radios of security officers and accordingly the judicial/security confrontation was renewed again. The escalation of the protest and the subsequent security/judicial confrontation led the 'ultras' leaders to comply with the pressure, dissolving their league and burning

its banners, which to the ultras youth represents great disgrace. However, the Ministry of Interior questioned the 'ultras' commitment to the decision to dissolve their league.

b- Turki Al-Sheikh's activity in Egypt

This theme covers the growing influence and infringement of Turki Al-Sheikh in Egypt, that led an Egyptian thinker to say: "The Turki Al-Sheikh phenomenon clearly reveals the quality of Sisi's investments; in fact, Sisi invests in Egypt's honor". The entry of Turki Al-Sheikh to Egypt in his capacity as Chairman of the General Sports Authority in Saudi Arabia to run investment in the field of sports in Egypt, and his main entry was through Al-Ahly Sporting Club in early 2018. With the start of pumping funds to Al-Ahly club through official sponsors and through informal financial flows, Al-Sheikh started to surpass the legal frameworks of his activity in Egypt, especially after granting him the honorary chairmanship of Al-Ahly Sporting Club, where he began to intervene in the technical matters of the club, which was met with a public rejection that forced the Chairman of the club, Mahmoud Khatib, to remove Al-Sheikh from the scene by cancelling his honorary chairmanship. Then a war of words began to escalate between the two men over time. Al-Sheikh then moved to buy a sporting club in Egypt, Assiuti Sporting Club, to resume his project. He changed the club's name to 'Pyramids Sporting Club', bought new players, set up a satellite channel, and even started to buy an audience for the new club. Al-Sheikh also started to give gifts to various Egyptian sporting clubs. He bought clothes of Zamalek football team worth 8 million pounds and supported the club in three deals for the purchase of players and promised support in others, in addition to providing support to the clubs of Al-Ittihad and El Sekka El Hadid sporting clubs, and was about to provide support to El-Masry Sporting Club but the club administration rejected his gift.

Al-Sheikh also went to spend money lavishly on the Egyptian Football Association and interfered in the federation's relationship with Professional Player Mohamed Salah. But his interventions in the Egyptian sporting affair led to the aggravation of the relationship between him and some sporting clubs and coaches, and even the Egyptian Football Association, and engaged in alterations with all these parties, in addition to his alteration with the International Federation of Football. In the context of political recruitment and the nature of the relations between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the Brotherhood was used by Al-Sheikh as a chandler for justifying the escalation of many of his differences.

Al-Sheikh also extended his influence in Egypt by forming a sporting media lobby through recruiting journalists in eight newspapers, including Al-Ahram, Al-Masry Al-Youm, Youm7, and others. He extended his influence to reach the Supreme Council for the Regulation of Media and the Interior Ministry, in addition to his frequent meetings with Sisi and officials in the Egyptian sovereign bodies. This led to the rise of popular rejection of the phenomenon of Turki Al-Sheikh, especially after his attack on Egyptian sports and public figures. The development of popular rejection of the roles played by Al-Sheikh extended from the 'Ultras Ahlawi' to football fans in Arab countries, including Lebanon and Morocco, for example.

Second: A Reading of the 'Ultras' Reaction

Amid the repression practiced against the 'ultras' leagues, there are several questions about the significance of the 'Ultras Ahlawy' move against Turki Al-Sheikh, which leads us to address this reading on two levels; the first level is related to the interpretation of the crisis and its limits, and the second level is related to the crisis implications.

a- Different perceptions of the causes of the crisis

With the outbreak of the crisis, at a time when it is difficult for the Ahly fans to challenge the authorities again after they had suffered from abuse, it was obvious that observers suggested two scenarios for this:

Some observers have suggested that it is likely that a segment of Al-Ahly fans would not be able to make such a protest without receiving a green light from the club's administration. This perception presents two scenarios in the assessment, as follows:

First Scenario:

The first scenario is that the Al-Ahly administration moves in isolation from the authorities and that it is creating a situation of protest against the presence of Turki Al-Sheikh in Egypt against the will of the government – which sees in Al-Sheikh an investment flow that could revive the sports scene in a time of recession in the structure of the Egyptian economy because of the waves of successive rise in prices, and the role played by Al-Sheikh within the government strategy of distraction.

Second Scenario:

The second scenario is the regime's awareness that the presence of Turki al-Sheikh in Egypt amid his controversial activities causes an extensive damage to its image, especially in connection with distorting the image of the state institutions that appeared worn out and almost under Al-Sheikh's command.

b- The most likely scenario

In this context, from the researcher's point of view, there is nothing left but the perception of an independent initiative by the Al-Ahly fans. If so, it is an expression of a bigger crisis that worries the Egyptian street and threatens the legitimacy of the

Egyptian regime after July 3 at the same time. This crisis is so deep that it pushed the fans of Al-Ahly Sporting Club to this protest, despite the repression they have suffered. The threat of legitimacy is not a matter of “exaggeration”. The manifestations of the threat did not stop at the limits of the emergence of clear indicators of the collapse of sectors of the state apparatus, security and non-security to the influence of Al-Sheikh, but Al-Sheikh’s approach in addressing the the crisis itself revealed a more complicated crisis, represented in an explicit “relationship of dependency” in the structure of the current Egyptian sports field, which clearly depended on Gulf sponsors, especially Saudi companies. The features of this ‘dependency’ have been revealed in the withdrawal of Al-Sheikh investments in Egypt as a clear punishment for those whom he perceived as parties to the crisis.

What proves that it is a deep crisis is the regime's handling of the crisis: The Egyptian director of intelligence visited Turki Al-Sheikh, and promised not to allow such a crisis to happen again.

Also, the social networking sites circulate reports that the Ministry of Waqfs assigned preachers to focus in the Friday sermon on “sanctity of mothers”, a subject that was linked directly to the insults directed to Al-Sheikh by “Ultras Ahlawy”. However, we can conclude that offensive words against Al-Sheikh was initiated by the fans of the Al-Ahly Sporting Club, and that these protests led to drawing the regime’s attention to the damages caused by the activity of Turki Al-Sheikh in Egypt outweighs the benefits gained from his investments.

c- Implication of the ‘Ultras’ Protest

The researcher believes that the emotional link that connects the Al-Ahly fans to their club is an abstract idea that is not necessarily related to the victories that the club

might achieve in the games that it plays. This connection between the ultras and their club is, in the researcher's view, the key to their protests and the chants against Turki Al-Sheikh. However, the message of the fans of Al-Ahly Sporting Club has not been a blatant challenge to the government, as we have seen in previous confrontations. Therefore, the chants against Al-Sheikh were limited.

Conclusion

The ultras' interactions with the Al-Sheikh phenomenon can be characterized by the direct correlation with the impact of this crisis on the Egyptian national conscience. Despite the price they have paid, and despite the potential price they would have to pay again, Ultras Ahlawy have expressed the Egyptians' rejection of Turki Al-Sheikh's infringement in Egypt. Although the chants of the ultras youth against Al-Sheikh did not develop into a clash with the Egyptian security forces, which reflects the public's keenness not to escalate with the State or the Egyptian Ministry of the Interior, the government's response came very harsh by accusing the Ahly fans of joining a terrorist group. This is a clear indication from the regime that it completely rejects any political role to be played by the 'ultras'.

However, the chants of the 'ultras' reflect a state of accumulated discontent. This discontent was not only manifested through the ultras' chants, but rather through the state of joy, with limited reservation on the insults. According to the researcher, this explosion cannot be withdrawn - because of the policies of the July 3 administration - on the whole political scene, which has not yet met the public's aspirations for a coherent and balanced political elite with a clear and decisive vision for the future.