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CASE ANALYSIS

The Port Said Uprising: The Emergence of Regionalism in the Absence of National Unity

Hani Awwad | April 2013

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Introduction

The second anniversary of the Egyptian revolution was celebrated while the country faced another crisis. On January 25, 2013, Egypt witnessed a wave of violence in its cities, which escalated after the courts preliminary ruling that ordered the death sentences for 21 citizens convicted of voluntary manslaughter after inciting the violence that overtook the Port Said Stadium in February 2012.¹ Following the verdict, the families of the accused rampaged through the streets and attacked Port Said's prison, where the defendants were detained, triggering a wave of clashes that continued for several days and cost the lives of dozens of Egyptians. The following two weeks saw the city turn into an arena for protest and civil unrest, with slogans stressing the regional dynamic of these popular movements. These developments shed light on the significance of the Port Said incidents, especially because they exhibited civilian conflict based on regionalism for the first time since the outbreak of the Egyptian revolution.

This paper analyzes the nature of the uprising in Port Said, as well as its social and cultural roots, and examines the stances and different approaches adopted by Egypt's political powers, both those in opposition and those in power.

Background and Causes of the Uprising

Violence broke out in Port Said after the preliminary death sentences had been issued for those accused of taking the lives of 21 people following a football match between Cairo's al-Ahli, whose major fan bases are in Cairo and Alexandria, and Port Said's al-Masris, whose main fan base is in Port Said. Ambiguities surround this incident, with the Ultras Ahlawy (an organization of radical al-Ahli football fans) and other Egyptian revolutionaries making accusations against the Military Council, who was managing Egypt's transitional phase at the time. Recent investigations have revealed that the causes of the clashes were, in fact, communal and impulsive, revealing the preponderance of conspiracy theories being spread through Egyptian political circles, not to mention the tendency of the political factions to put blame on their opponents, particularly if the accusation is politically opportune. This time, the Egyptian Army was blamed for the bloody events in Port Said, putting the clashes down to a scheme plotted by the army rather than a flare up of social violence.

¹ This tragedy took place after a football match between the al-Masri and al-Ahli teams, and claimed the lives of 74 people.

The study of football associations in Egypt is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to note that these associations differ significantly from those in other Arab countries to the extent that one could almost deem them as social movements.² Under the former regime, public space was closed off from politics, so these associations proved useful in mobilizing crowds that political parties could not outreach. In fact, many of the Ultras Ahlawy fans were behind the January 25 revolution, especially when it came to confronting the security forces crackdown on the “Friday of Anger” on January 28. Their numbers were strong enough to form groups that broke through the police barricades and confronted the thugs who were hired by the former regime.

Ultras Ahlawy fans, whose numbers are in the hundreds of thousands, come from varying political and social backgrounds; some sided with the revolution, some were initially against it, and others had no political affiliations. Until recently, the administration of the Ahli Club was classified as part of the “remnants” of the old regime, until the old administration was dismantled by the wave of changes that came with the revolution. In truth, the Ultras Ahlawy is a sports association that in exceptional circumstances may incite a political stance, even if it is not in itself political.

As the date for the Port Said verdict neared, the Ultras rallied Egyptians with the slogan “January 26: punishment or chaos,” demonstrating throughout the squares of Cairo and demanding punishment for those who stood behind the stadium killings. Other groups, collectively calling themselves the Black Bloc,³ stalled the Cairo stock exchange, paralyzed the movement of the metro, and cut off main streets. These are just some of the measures adopted by the group to create chaos. Meanwhile, the police not only appeared reticent in maintaining order, but also incapable of doing so. The ruling happened to coincide with the second anniversary of the Egyptian revolution, when opposition forces were preparing to organize a million man march in rejection of the new constitution, which was approved through a popular referendum.

² Egypt is not an exceptional case. In Europe, analysts attempt to gauge the general mood of the public by analyzing the chants of sports fans. Football games have frequently been turned into battlegrounds with the exchange of racist slogans and political messages.

³ Black Bloc is a masked youth group that wears black from head to toe. Similar groups appeared for the first time in Germany in the 1980s in protest of certain issues, such as discrimination and nuclear energy. They then spread across Europe, America, and Canada. In general, these groups have an anarchist tendency.

The Egyptian opposition exploited the Port Said stadium incident while attempting to mobilize protests directed against the Egyptian government and the Islamist forces. In a January 26 statement, the Salvation Front called for holding the murderers accountable, in addition to other demands related to the constitution and the elections law issued by the Consultative Council. Additionally, the Egyptian media presented the Ultras' protest demands and those of the opposition as one. Unfortunately, slogans that were raised in Tahrir Square and in the centers of other Egyptian cities were prejudiced and insulted the people of Port Said. Such insults were also circulated on social media networks and You Tube.⁴ This did not, however, prevent the opposition from later sympathizing with Port Said's citizen protests against the execution verdicts. What is more, the opposition actually accused the government of being responsible for these events, despite the fact that the rulings were issued by the courts.

However, what the opposition failed to detect was that the Ultras fans had taken to the streets to protest as a sports association, driven by the demand to prosecute Port Said's perpetrators. Once the court ruling was issued, thereby confirming the execution verdicts, many of the fans celebrated the news and abandoned the protests shortly after. One can see, then, that these two groups—the opposition and the Ultras fans—shared a short-lived partnership.

Following the verdicts on January 26, there was more violence. As the Ultras fans were celebrating the ruling, families of the accused attacked the Port Said prison where their sons were being held, leading to several deaths among the police and the protesters, and the spread of chaos in Port Said. Egyptian media has documented the use of firearms by some of the protesters, as well as robberies and lootings in which offenders showed no qualms in showing their identity. Even so, security forces did nothing to stop them, ultimately causing the army's entrance onto the streets in an attempt to secure public institutions at the president's request.

The failure of the security forces to perform their duty was obvious throughout the riots; in instances when the police would intervene, violence would flare up. Egypt's security apparatus is, after all, a remnant of the old regime, an issue that is rarely brought up because the political forces are divided on the subject to such an extent that they are unable to take a unified stand toward the former regime. Such a scenario has

⁴ See, for example, the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27qhJRml0wE>.

led to a wave of violence that has seen the families of the victims attempt to take revenge on the security forces by attacking security headquarters and targeting security forces using armed force, leading to the death of many protesters and policemen. The police's use of extreme and unwarranted violence forced the protestors to ask for the army's protection, with many in Port Said signing power-of-attorney documents that would give the army power over the country's affairs.

To the citizens of Port Said, the death sentences were issued to appease the fans of the al-Ahli Club, which aggravated the crisis. Dozens of protesters (mostly from the families of the accused) attacked the Port Said prison and the surrounding state buildings. Resorting to violence was an easy option, especially considering that Egypt has been undergoing rampant street violence and disorder since the transitional phase began, demonstrating an implicit realization among the crowds that authorities only respond to a language of force.

Since the "demystification" of the old regime, the stature of the state was irrevocably damaged. Against this backdrop, it is perhaps predictable that many people turn to violence, as is happening in Egypt, including blocking the roads, assaulting public institutions, and organizing demonstrations that are union backed. From the time the old regime was overthrown, almost not a single week has passed without an incidence of chaos or violence being reported in the news. Undeniably, these incidents have increased in the absence of a national consensus among the contending political factions, who tend to resort to the street rather than dialogue. The reaction in Port Said, which very quickly turned into large popular protests, is an apt example of this trend. This popular solidarity movement was caused by an avalanche of accusations of thuggery, mainly channeled by the media, directed at Port Said's citizens. These accusations were both promoted by the regime, as shown in President Morsi's speech on January 28, and the position adopted by Prime Minister Hisham Qandil, in addition to the main opposition figures, such as the Salvation Front, Mohamed ElBaradei, Amr Moussa, Hamadeen Sabahi, and other personalities and political parties.

The Port Said regional uprising has surprised the regime and the opposition. Despite the decisiveness President Morsi tried to inspire through his January 28 speech—imposing a State of Emergency and a curfew for the Suez Canal, as well as giving the army the right to conduct judicial arrests—the people of Port Said disregarded his attempts on the same day, forcing Morsi to revert his decision.

The Road to Massacre: Roots of Regionalism in Port Said

The city of Port Said is the third largest economic center in Egypt, after Cairo and Alexandria, and the main economic hub for the cities of the Suez Canal, or what came to be called the “cities of the deep state”. The city was not, nor has it been, subjected to deliberate marginalization by the former regime or the current government, contrary to what is being promoted in the media and by some intellectuals. In fact, first impressions reveal that Port Said has been given priority when it comes to the employment of its citizens in the Suez Canal companies and various state institutions. This has increased tensions between the people, such as those from Suez, for instance, and state authorities.⁵ The number of public servants in both cities confirms these impressions, with public employees in Port Said largely outnumbering their counterparts in Suez. At the same time, Port Said had approximately 22 percent of unemployment, while Suez reached 32 percent.⁶ Interestingly, Port Said has an increased number of female workers due to the changes in social norms taking place since the city became a free zone in 1976. Such a setting meant that the people of Port Said were initially less inclined to join January 25 revolution compared to those from Suez and other urban centers. However, such claims should be taken with caution since it remains difficult to establish a causal link between social and economic marginalization and participation in the revolution.

Ultimately, it remains a challenge to prove that the urban cities near the Suez Canal—specifically Port Said and Suez—were subjected to marginalization policies under the ousted President Hosni Mubarak; it would also be difficult to prove that they were not. The Statistical Agency of Egypt has found that these two cities feature the lowest poverty and unemployment rates compared to the national average and other urban centers. It is likely that this perceived sense of marginalization grew out of the dynamics in the relationship between the two cities and the general failure of development policies in Egypt, not to mention the closing of the duty free zone. At any rate, this sentiment was not reflected in the last constitutional referendum, with 75 percent of the Suez voters and 70 percent of those from Port Said approving the constitution.

⁵ Testimonials collected by ACRPS researchers documenting the Egyptian revolution in the city of Suez.

⁶ The Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), Statistical Yearbook (September 2012).

Moreover, the fact that the losing presidential candidate, Ahmad Shafik, was capable of garnering 55 percent of the votes in Port Said indicates that the locals took to Shafik's notion of stability promoted after the economic crisis that afflicted Egypt during the transitional phase. During the past decade, the political leanings of Port Said were generally not opposed to the ruling authority, despite the ebbs and flows in the standard of living of the city. After all, Port Said represents a city just like other cities, whose living standard is dependent on stability and economic gains.

What distinguishes Port Said from other cities is its strong regional identity, which began to take shape with its resistance against the British. The historical roots of the popular resistance in Port Said go back to the time of its foundation, when it was still affiliated with the Ismailia governorate. Port Said was founded in the 19th century as a European settlement on Egyptian land; its location and planning were primarily chosen to suit European needs and interests, which led to a divide between the foreigners living in the city and the indigenous population. Native Egyptians were far more sympathetic to resistance against the British colonizer "due to the fact that foreigners enjoyed more privileges than the locals".⁷ Consequently, a series of strikes led by the coal workers and the coast guard employees took place. The local movement in Port Said influenced nearby Egyptian cities, such as Damietta, Ismailia, and Suez, sometimes reaching Cairo and Alexandria. This demonstrates Port Said's privileged status, in comparison to other Egyptian cities, making it the third national city after Cairo and Alexandria.

To this day, the people of Port Said retell their ancestor's stories about their resistance against the British occupier in 1882, especially regarding the battle of the Taba al-Jamil Fort. People also recall the first demonstrations that broke out in reaction to the events of Cairo following the exile of the national leader Saad Zaghlul, which later developed into a popular revolution in 1919. In 1951, the Egyptian Nationalist Movement abolished the 1936 treaty, leading Port Said to a state of civil unrest, which quickly turned into clashes that resulted in dozens of deaths and injuries. In 1952, following the nationalization of the Suez Canal by Gamal Abd al-Nasir, the Tripartite Aggression was declared against Egypt. Again, the city demonstrated their resistance in what became known as "the Battle for Port Said"; during the June 1967 Israeli aggression against

⁷ Zein al-Abidin and Shams al-Din Najm, *Port Said: Its History and Development, since its Founding in 1859 and until 1882* (Cairo: the General Egyptian Book Organization, 1987), pp. 421-425.

Egypt, the citizens of Port Said resisted again, and during the War of Attrition and the 1973 October War, it became a base for the Egyptian incursions.

The Canal cities, particularly Port Said and Suez, suffered enormously during the War of Attrition, underwent significant destruction. It was perhaps natural, therefore, for regional identities to emerge in the peripheral parts of the country, molded in a shared history of resistance, bringing about characteristics that are deemed "Port Saidian" and "Suezian". Moreover, due to the struggles they faced during Israeli occupation, the citizens of Suez and Port Said felt entitled to a share of the post-liberation revenues produced by the Canal. Unlike the citizens of Suez, the people of Port Said felt, at the time, that their city was rewarded by being made the economic center of the Canal, especially after the inauguration of the Port Said Free Zone, which changed the city's lifestyle and enshrined values of work and commerce. In fact, the emergence of commercial life in the city has been documented in numerous Egyptian films, the most famous being "al-Mashbuh" (the Suspect), first released in 1981.

As a result, a regionalist *esprit de corps* was entrenched in Port Said, manifesting itself in different ways, with various intellectuals attempting to document this distinctiveness. The city proudly features many books that chronicle its history, heroes, and symbols; additionally, Port Said's dialect of Arabic was recorded, as were the specificities of the Port Saidian cuisine. Expressions that refer to "the Port Saidian people" are extremely common in the local lexicon, and the regional pride is such that in 2005 a Port Saidian MP publicly complained to the People's Assembly about the movie "al-Sayyid Abu al-Arabi Wasal" because it featured the life of a crooked Port Saidian young man. He described the film as "insulting to the Port Saidian people". The film was eventually removed from local movie theatres.⁸

Maintaining stability and ensuring the smooth passage of foreign vessels through the Suez Canal was pivotal to Port Said citizens, making them dependent on the state's ability to maintain order. This may explain the city's relative calm throughout the transitional phase, until the sentencing in the stadium massacre. It is likely that the regional element was present during these bloody incidents. There were already precedents of clashes, such as throwing rocks and broken glass, between Port Said and

⁸ The projection of the movie was suspended in Port Said, with demands to withdraw it from all Egyptian movie theatres: "A 'city's revolution' against the film 'Abu al-Arabi Wasal'," *Al-Chourouk daily* (Tunisia), June 18, 2005, <http://www.alchourouk.com/Ar/pdf.php?code=231113>.

al-Ahli fans following a football match in 2008. In 2011, the same tension arose and the events spilled out into the streets and the squares of the city [Port Said].⁹ Prior to the date of the catastrophic football match on February 1, 2012, the “song of death,” sung by the Port Said Ultras, threatening death to al-Ahli fans, spread across social networks.¹⁰

When examining chants made by al-Ahli and al-Masri fans during the match, one can better understand what led to the flare up and eventual disaster in Port Said. The al-Ahli fans chanted slogans insulting the people of Port Said for not participating in the Egyptian revolution, such as “a rotten city that did not give birth to [real] men.”¹¹ They also called for the downfall of the military in order to provoke the Port Said fans. In exchange, the Port Said Ultras indulged in a “war of slogans” that lauded the legacy of the city and the Port Saidian character. Port Said fans became out of control and began shouting chants promising death to al-Ahli fans.¹²

The massacre at the stadium left more than 70 dead, shocking Egyptians and the wider Arab public. Despite the fact that the circumstances of the massacre clearly point to regionalist violence fuelled by the fans’ fanaticism, the revolution’s youth accused the Supreme Military Council, which was leading the transitional phase at the time. Rumors abounded that the army was punishing the al-Ahli Ultras for their role in the January 25 revolution. Various political factions took this stand, claiming that “hidden hands” made the security forces look the other way as the clashes took place, with some claiming that the security forces actually facilitated the clashes. In fact, the mobilization that occurred across Egypt at the time of these incidents coincided with the first anniversary of the Egyptian revolution, which saw additional large protests, making it impossible for any security apparatus to conjure up enough resources to effectively intervene between the battling crowds and prevent the massacre from taking place.

For an entire year, the al-Ahli fans relentlessly pursued their campaign against the people of Port Said, putting out numerous songs and slogans that portrayed the city as a place of death and thuggery. On the eve of the Port Said sentencing, after having persuaded the opposition crowds to join the al-Ahli Ultras’ cause, protests in Tahrir

⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qggP4vUuTs>.

¹⁰ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KChZSAo-6Ds>.

¹¹ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICE4LE_nNo4.

¹² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZidjwXufes>.

Square featured numerous slogans insulting the people of Port Said. Perhaps, predictably, Port Said's citizens were led to believe that the court issued the sentence in order to appease the al-Ahli fans, and that this represented a bias against the city. Consequently, the people of Port Said protested for weeks on end, leading to unrest and a general strike. Since day one, it was clear that the ongoing protests did not have a political character, leading the Egyptian authority and the opposition to deal with these uprisings in a different manner.

Policies for Dealing with Civil Crises in Egypt

In general, one could say that regionalist protests are rare in Egypt in comparison with neighboring countries. The city of Suez represents an exception in that it has seen limited and intermittent tensions with the state since the end of former president Anwar al-Sadat's leadership. Aside from Suez, the ongoing uprising in Port Said is the first incident to exhibit a regionalist undertone with extreme civil disobedience. Despite the latent nature of regionalism, it remains, nonetheless, present until this day. Behind regionalism are the policies of the former regime, which neglected a nation-building process or even efforts to establish a political identity based on the notion of citizenship.¹³ Because social integration was considered a low priority over the last decades, civil conflicts were dealt with on a case-by-case basis, while still sponsoring social reconciliations. This was clearly the state's approach in dealing with sectarian tensions, as can be seen through the state's perspective on non-political crises.

In a report covering sectarian incidents in Egypt between January 2008 and January 2010, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights noted that the state does not have a plan to confront or treat sectarian violence, and that it views sectarian incidents as "isolated incidents, without any comprehensive view regarding the root causes, the symptoms, or needed solutions".¹⁴ It also notes that in instances where the state does intervene, this intervention is usually carried out through the security apparatus and with the use of methods that are "insufficient, violent, short-sighted, and, in most cases, illegal and always aiming at imposing calm by force: [the parties have to] either

¹³ For further information, see: Azmi Bishara, *On the Arab Question: A Preamble for an Arab Democratic Manifesto* (in Arabic) 2nd edition, (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2010), 185-186.

¹⁴ Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, "Two years of sectarian violence: What happened? Where do we begin? An Analytic Study of January 2008-January 2010," April 2010, <http://eipr.org/report/2010/04/11/757>.

accept reconciliation, or face arrest and, sometimes, collective punishment". Most often, state institutions and ministries tend to maintain a distance from such violent events and sectarian tensions, as if these matters do not concern them. The local leaders are usually called upon in order to impose pacification, and not in order to enact the law by presenting the perpetrator to justice.¹⁵

Typically, the courts are excluded from dealing with such matters since the public prosecution does not forward cases of sectarian violence. While the law grants the investigating magistrate the power to pursue immediate and independent investigations in order to identify the culprits and bring them to justice, the prosecution usually aids the security agencies with reconciliation efforts, even if these arrangements contravened the law, such as acquiescing to amicable resolutions in criminal cases, which is not permitted in Egyptian law.¹⁶

The Egyptian state is not accustomed to legally dealing with apolitical incidents of violence. In fact, the execution sentences that were pronounced on January 26 may have been the first such cases to be turned over to the courts. This explains the shock witnessed by Port Said locals immediately after the sentencing, prompting them to rise in protest. In reality, the trial's transfer to court, in addition to the sentencing, took place in response to civil pressure, applied by al-Ahli fans for over a year, in order to try those who committed the Port Said stadium massacre.

The regionalist uprising by the people of Port Said took the authority, which stood inactive for more than 48 hours before realizing what was happening in the city, by surprise. Subsequently, the state imposed a 30-day state of emergency that included the imposition of a curfew in the three governorates bordering the Suez Canal. Omar Salem, Minister of State for Legal and Parliamentary Affairs, described the events as "a rebellion by thugs who want to spread havoc everywhere".¹⁷ Once the protests grew larger and the security measures failed to contain them, the president decided to loosen the state of emergency and put an end to the curfew. The government later tried to appease the locals by announcing the re-opening of the Free Zone and the allocation of

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ "The Shura Council agrees to impose the state of emergency in the Canal's governorates," *Masrawy website*, January 28, 2013,

<http://www.masrawy.com/news/egypt/politics/2013/January/28/5505885.aspx>. See also:

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/1251/17/Shura-Council-endorses-emergency-law.aspx>.

an annual 400 million Egyptian Pounds from the Canal revenues to develop the three bordering governorates. This approach can be interpreted as a return to the old tradition of dealing with civil violence, a setback for the rule of law, and acquiescence to regionalist logic. After all, the protesters did not take to the streets because of their economic hardships; furthermore, decisions on development and public spending should not be made as a reaction to the protests, but as the result of an economic vision.

On the other hand, the opposition forces, particularly the Salvation Front, were even more confused, as they supported the al-Ahli Ultras in their demands and demonstrations, which coincided with the opposition's protests. When a group of Cairo protesters attempted to break into the Presidential Palace and hurled Molotov cocktails at the building, other groups attacked provincial administrations and security branches in other central cities. The public had the impression, further reinforced by the media, that the events in Port Said are similar to those occurring in other governorates. This led the opposition to call for dialogue, demanding the removal of any political cover from those engaging in violence, and then signed the Azhar Document, which reprovved violence, in haste. While the opposition insisted that they signed the document merely as an ethical statement, the opposition showed their real desire to keep the conflict within the bounds of the political realm.

Throughout the following weeks, the Egyptian media was releasing numerous reports describing attempts, by both the authority and the opposition, to gain the favor of the city's residents and to retribute their dignity. This only happened after it became clear that the protests were spreading, leading to significant financial losses from one of the main income sources of the state—the Suez Canal. Furthermore, the media and political platforms naturally attempted to exploit the protests in order to embarrass the regime and to accuse it of incompetence and of replicating the behavior of the former regime, which was followed by an irresponsible media campaign asking the army to wage a coup in order to save the country.

Conclusion

The ongoing protests in Egypt today, and the perseverance of the transitional phase despite its official end, makes it difficult to ascertain whether the current violence and chaos crippling Egypt will shortly come to an end. Egypt's authority has been demystified, which means that any state-sponsored attempt to remedy the situation

may be confronted by social or political resistance, making the path toward the state of law even more strenuous.

Up until the writing of this paper, Egypt remains victim to frequent acts of protest that manifest in the most violent and shocking ways. Still, the protests of Port Said could not have escalated had it not been for the pre-existing environment. The lack of national unity during the transitional phase will further weaken the state, and will strengthen regional, tribal, and communal tendencies. Failing change, with each party treating others with the logic of conflict and demagoguery, this may, instead, mobilize Egypt's public opinion against democracy and strengthen calls for the imposition of order and security, as revolution has almost become synonymous with chaos for Egyptians.

It is time for the political forces to begin a substantive discussion on how to preserve the interests of the country and democratic transition, regardless of their political disagreements. They should establish an agreement on the main points of contention in order to manage the rest of the transitional phase, which requires a willingness to resolve the root causes of the social protests, achieve the demands of the revolution, and establish the state of law.