

Ramón Spaaij (2014) 'Football-Related Violence and the Impact of Political Conflicts', *Panorama: Insights into Asian and European Affairs* 5(1): 71-74.

## **Football-Related Violence and the Impact of Political Conflicts**

Ramón Spaaij

On 1 February 2012, the Egyptian city of Port Said witnessed one of the deadliest episodes of football-related violence in modern history. Seventy-four people were killed and hundreds injured when spectators invaded the playing field after a football match between Al-Masry and Al-Ahly. Most of the deaths were caused by concussions, stab wounds and suffocation from the stampede. The subsequent sentencing to death of 21 football fans on charges of having been responsible for the brawl sparked fierce protests on the streets of Port Said, with many militant fans holding the military and security forces responsible for the deaths.

The events that have rocked Egyptian football in recent years should be understood in the context of the ongoing political conflict in the country. Football fan activism has long been a driver of political protest in Egypt, turning football grounds into battlefields against the armed forces and the military-backed government. Football fans acted as “shock troops” of the anti-Mubarak revolt and anti-military protests prior to the election of Mohammed Morsi in July 2012. In the wake of the Port Said tragedy, the Egyptian authorities initially suspended the football league to prevent further violence, a suspension that was repeatedly extended for fear that militant fans would again use football grounds as a platform for the expression of political dissent.

The recent developments in Egypt highlight how football-related violence can have its roots in broader political conflict or social unrest. But how common is this fusing of militant

football fandom and political movements? And how precisely do political conflicts and hostilities impact on football-related violence?

In this essay, I will address these questions with a particular focus on militant football fan subcultures known as “football hooligans” or “ultras”, which are dominated by male partisan fans whose opposition is primarily targeted at rival fan groups with whom there is often a history of hostility and confrontation. These subcultures constitute one particular modality of sports crowd violence, one to which several countries have been exposed. The kinds of collective identities produced in these subcultures range from hyperpoliticised to apolitical. In the former, political difference is a major fault line that fuels and contours the rivalries and actions of militant football fans, including the use of violence. In such conditions, football, its sites and its crowds can offer considerable potential for political mobilisation, recruitment and demagoguery, as well as staging grounds for sectarian rivalries on local, regional, national and international levels.

## **Football and War**

The relationship between football, violence and politics is as old as the game itself. From the Middle Ages onwards, the various forms of “football” were frequently violent affairs involving rival social groups. In the modern era, football has often been used as a platform for political propaganda and the expression of political rivalries and hostilities (Armstrong and Giulianotti, 2001). In their most extreme manifestation, the enactment of political rivalries through football can be linked closely to inter-communal violence and war.

Perhaps the best known example of the link between football and war is the Football War fought by El Salvador and Honduras in 1969, which erupted following a qualifying match for the 1970 FIFA World Cup. The football match clearly did not cause the war between El Salvador and Honduras, which had more deep-seated political, social and historical causes.

Indeed, the war had been predated by a series of political tensions and conflicts between the two countries. However, the qualifying match did act as a triggering event for the ensuing war.

The potential that football and its crowds offers for political mobilisation and demagoguery was also evident in the former Yugoslavia, where in the late 1980s and early 1990s the links between armed conflict and activities of previously established football fan groups were particularly strong. Tribal activity and hooligan violence at matches between Serbian and Croatian clubs in 1990 were an important flashpoint for the outbreak of the Balkan War. In the wake of the football-related rioting, militant fan groups transferred from the football stadium to the rival military forces on the Serbian and Croatian sides, acting as a catalyst for political violence on a mass scale. Most famously, Arkan, the leader of Red Star Belgrade's militant fans, became the commander of the voluntary Serbian paramilitary unit named the 'Tigers', which was responsible for war crimes in Croatia and Bosnia. Reflecting on the Balkan War, anthropologist Ivan Čolović (2002) has argued that in the context of deep-seated ethno-political conflict, it is in the interest of the political authorities that football hooligans' sense of opposition and taste for violence be conserved for the realisation of wartime goals. While in times of peace football-related violence may be targeted at authority and established social values, in times of war it can be mobilised by political actors and redirected at external enemies of the state.

### **Football Fans and Extremist Politics**

The Balkan War is an extreme and exceptional manifestation of the role that football grounds can play as recruitment centres for radical political actors. However, comparable – yet (so far) less severe – manifestations of this process can be found in other times and places too. Far-right organisations in the United Kingdom, such as the National Front (1970s), British National Party (1990s) and Combat 18 (1990s and early 2000s), viewed football stadia as a potentially fertile ground for recruitment. Overall, with a few notable exceptions, these organisations have had

little apparent success among fans of domestic club football in the UK. More recently, the English Defence League (EDL) has similarly tried to attract disaffected football fans, and in particular hooligans, to its cause, and with greater success. There appear to be relatively strong links between the EDL and hooligan groups from a range of English football clubs. Coalescing under the banner of “Casuals United”, these groups share much of the EDL’s anti-Islamic thinking and have been mobilised as “street fighters” to recent EDL demonstrations. According to Garland and Treadwell (2010), this present fusing of football hooligan culture and extremist politics poses the most significant threat to community cohesion in Britain’s cities since the heyday of the National Front in the 1970s.

A similar trend of the fusing of far-right political movements and militant football fans has been observed in various Eastern and Southern European countries, including Russia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Greece. While this often involves militant fan groups loosely espousing racial hatred and anti-Semitism, in some cases a stronger association between militant football fans and the nationalist far right can be found. In Russia, for example, there are growing concerns about the endemic nature of football violence and its link to far-right groups, according to recent media reports (e.g., Gibson, 2013).

In some countries, the enactment and exacerbation of political rivalries through football fandom is nothing new. Spain and Italy serve as examples of countries with hyperpoliticised football fan subcultures. Both countries have vibrant *ultra* movements whose ties with far-right and far-left political ideologies are well documented. In 1980s’ Spain, for example, militant football fans increasingly ascribed to political tendencies that came to constitute a dichotomy between those who identified with the far right on the one hand, and those who expressed stances close to the far left on the other hand. The extreme politicisation of the ultras triggered several outbreaks of collective violence both inside and outside football grounds; violence not only against rival fans but also against political opponents. This proliferation of violent

confrontations between politically opposed fan groups marked an important developmental stage of the ultra movement in Spanish football.

Hyperpoliticisation still characterises the Spanish ultra movement to a significant degree, and it continues to influence fans' identities and actions. While some Spanish ultras have come to see that their political rivalries should not be pursued using violent means, others believe that violence is “the only way” and “the most effective way”. However, unlike the former Yugoslavia, where militant fans became elevated to the status of national heroes during the Balkan War, political movements in Spain have generally been reluctant to recognise the ultras as anything more than “street fighters”, and often consider them a liability due to their lack of organisation and party discipline, thereby potentially damaging the image of the organisation. However, the ultras do maintain loose relationships with such organisations, and have at times participated in their protest events in ways akin to Casuals United.

## **Conclusion**

It would be naïve to view football as the *cause* of armed political conflict and war. At worst, it can act as a catalyst or triggering event for political violence on a mass scale. However, football, its sites and its crowds can be used to reinforce or escalate already existing political tensions and hostilities. Not only do they offer considerable potential for political mobilisation, recruitment and demagogy, but in certain circumstances they may also act as a staging ground or battlefield for political conflicts, especially where there is a fusing of militant fan subcultures and radical political movements. This relationship between football, violence and politics manifests itself differently in different countries and in different time periods, fuelled and contoured by the underlying political, social or religious divisions of particular societies.

## **References**

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### **Biographical note**

Ramón Spaaij, PhD, is an associate professor at Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia, and Special Chair of Sociology of Sport at the University of Amsterdam. He is also a visiting professor at the Utrecht University School of Governance, The Netherlands.