

Egypt vs. Algeria - the nasty politics of football

Francis Ghilès
Senior Researcher, CIDOB

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On Thursday 12th November the bus ferrying the Algerian national football team from Cairo airport to the hotel was stoned by Egyptians - the police did not intervene before a number of players were seriously wounded, some even needed stitches. The Pharaohs won 2-0 against the Fennecs (desert fox) thus forcing a play-off which was to be played in the capital of Sudan, Khartoum, on 18th November. The outcome of that match would decide which team would qualify to represent Africa for the finals of the World Cup due in South Africa next year. Ugly incidents occurred between supporters of both teams after the first match which spread to three countries in the run up to the second match.

Reckless reporting fanned by Egyptian and Algerian political leaders resulted in large scale demonstrations in Algiers when the Algerian popular newspaper Chourouk reported one Algerian fan had died - it later turned out he had fainted. President Mubarak's sons joined the fray: they attacked Algerians for being terrorists on television of Algerian terrorism. Blogs meanwhile went into overdrive, Algerian bloggers promising to avenge the blood of their brother "killed" in Cairo, Egyptians sneering at Algerians for having been colonised by the French for 132 years. The Algerian authorities meanwhile slapped a \$600m tax bill on Orascom, the Egyptian company which has a high profile in Algeria and whose headquarters were thrashed by crowds of Algerian supporters. Serious incidents had already occurred between Egyptians and Algerians in Cairo on a previous occasion after a match ahead of the World Cup in Italy in 1989

On Monday 16th, the Algerian head of state, Abdelaziz Bouteflika ordered 30 planes be chartered from Algiers to get supporters to Khartoum. The Houari Boumediene airport was swamped with thousands of young people, often in tears, desperate to get a ticket and a visa to fly out to defend the honour of their beloved team. On Wednesday night, the Fennecs scored a decisive goal which took Algeria to the World Cup for the first time in 20 years. A few lessons can be drawn from these events which have not yet degenerated into a war as happened a few decades ago between Honduras and El Salvador.

- 1) The nationalistic bombast and insults which preceded the first match - Egypt outdid Algeria here - show how little brotherly love exists today between Arab countries. Pan Arab nationalism is long since dead replaced by an increasingly strident populism which in the years ahead risks posing far greater problems for the European Union in the Mediterranean than any misconstrued "clash of civilisations".
- 2) Algerian youth were out en masse to support their beloved Fennecs but, beyond supporting the national team they were clamouring for their voice to be heard, recognised and respected by leaders who are often old and despise them openly. They are clamouring for jobs, houses, in other words hope for a better future. As people under the age of 30 represent two thirds of the population, Algerian leaders who felt happy to fan national feelings where football is concerned might not be aware they are riding a tiger.
- 3) The emotion felt in Algeria on Wednesday the 18th November was shared in neighbouring Tunisia and Morocco, in France and Belgium where large communities of North African origin live and in Gaza. Young people took to the streets on foot and in cars in Casablanca and Paris, shouting their delight that "we" had won against the Egyptians. "We" was the Maghreb: the feeling of sharing a common culture persists in North Africa despite more than thirty years of estrangement between Algeria and Morocco over the status of the Western Sahara. North African leaders are locked in their battle of yesteryear, incapable of offering a vision of the future to their young people.

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- 4) Finally, as Akram Belkaid argued in *Le Quotidien d'Oran* on 26th November, part of Algeria's success was due to the selection of young and professional players, some of whom came from European teams and were treated with respect by the Algerian football authorities. Why is it, he asked, the Algerian leaders cannot behave towards their talented diaspora overall like they do towards their footballers? This diaspora could play a key role in modernising Algeria, transmitting modern know how, in other words opening Algeria to the world. This would help create desperately needed jobs.
- 5) Egypt has long held North Africans in contempt for "not being Arab", mere "Berbers and barbarians" as Mubarak's sons so elegantly put it. These people are unable to speak the language of the Prophet properly, in other words *arroubis* (country bumpkins). Such insulting language gives the lie to the oft proclaimed Arab *umma* (community of the faithful). It also points to another, potentially more interesting political development: as Egypt fights to retain a central role in Arab politics which it is fast losing, "the Algerian lion has been awoken from its long slumber" in the words of a senior Libyan who is a keen observer of the region's politics. In private senior Egyptians see the whole episode as a repeat of the Six Day War when they suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of Israel.

Algeria has just lived through a rare moment of unity when all classes and age groups communed in an emotion which spread to the streets of Tunis, Rabat, Gaza and on to the Champs Elysées in the heart of Paris. But emotion alone cannot create jobs, houses, a better future and stop thousands of despairing youngsters from drowning in the Mediterranean as they seek a better life abroad. Will Algerian leaders dare reach out to this younger generation and bring them into the fold?

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Elisabets, 12
08001 Barcelona
Espanya
Tel. (+34) 93 302 6495
Fax. (+34) 93 302 6495
info@cidob.org