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## An Underground Army Challenges President Sisi

With the Muslim Brotherhood in disarray, a new generation takes to the streets in Egypt.

By Nicholas LinnNicholas

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Since the popularly backed military takeover in 2013, Egypt's new government has systematically rounded up its adversaries and placed them behind bars: bloggers, youth movement leaders, religious leaders, journalists. But one opposition group continues to slip through the government's nets. Its members call themselves the Ultras Nahdawy. They're secretive, loosely organized, and rapidly growing in number.

Egypt is famous for its Ultras: massive groups of hardcore soccer fans that are often found at the center of a riot. But the Nahdawy are Ultras of a different sort. Rather than uniting around their fanatic love for a soccer team, they are united in their support for deposed president Mohamed Morsi and a desire to return him and the Muslim Brotherhood to power. “The Ultras Nahdawy is the first political Ultras group in the Middle East,” founding member Mohammed Faisal said.

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At 18, Faisal makes for a perfect Ultras member. He’s young, poor, devoutly religious — and he has nothing left to lose. Over the last year and half, he’s watched dozens of his friends get scooped up by the police for protesting against the military takeover. He himself was expelled from Cairo University last October for fighting security personnel at an on-campus demonstration and is now resigned to a job as an assistant air-conditioning repairman. In January, his 21-year-old brother was killed, shot twice at a protest in Matareya. He watched even more friends die at the hands of the police in February, in a riot outside a football match. There is nothing more the government can take from him.

For Faisal and thousands of others like him, the Ultras Nahdawy offer a purpose, a support network, and a way to make their voices heard. “My friends were dying and being thrown in jail one by one,” said Hazem Mohammed, an Ultras member from Giza. “I saw there was injustice everywhere so I wanted to do something. The Ultras were doing something.”

The Ultras Nahdawy formed in late 2012 in response to a growing movement against former president Mohammed Morsi. “It started out as just a group of about 50 of us who got to know each other at a sit-in,” Faisal said. “We found each other because we were the ones chanting the loudest. And when we saw that we were all young people who love soccer and share the same beliefs, we decided to form an organization. We called ourselves the Ultras Morsi at first.” The idea was to use the networks of the Ultras soccer fan clubs to mobilize support for Morsi. The Nahdawy started out small but shot up in numbers after the military violently cleared pro-Morsi sit-ins at Rabaa and Ennahda Squares, killing as many as 1,000.

“Before the clearing, we had maybe a thousand members,” Faisal said. “Ten of them were killed at Ennahda Square and that’s when we changed our name to the Ultras Nahdawy (meaning ‘the Ultras of Ennahda’) in their honor. After that, we grew to 10,000 members very quickly.”

Wafaa el Banna, granddaughter of Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan el Banna, said the Ultras Nahdawy played a crucial role in mobilizing opposition to the military in the days that followed the coup. “They were the originators of most of the slogans and chants,” el Banna said. “They were the leaders of most of the protests after [the clearing of] Rabaa Square. They gave people hope just like they do in football. What happened at Rabaa was God-made. The Ultras are God-made.”

Although the Muslim Brotherhood is keen to have the Ultras on its side, el Banna was careful to note that the two groups are not officially affiliated. “It is very inconsiderate to slap the label of Muslim Brotherhood on anyone who is anti-coup,” el Banna said. “You can be for Morsi and for legitimacy without being a Brotherhood member.”

Political researcher and Brookings fellow H. A. Hellyer said this sort of rhetoric has been at the center of the Brotherhood’s PR strategy since the military takeover: championing dissent but refusing to take ownership of it. “The reality is that the Muslim Brotherhood has lost tremendously in the last year and a half and everything they’re doing right now is about maintaining a semblance of brand,” Hellyer said. This “brand” is pro-democracy, anti-violence, anti-extremism — and the Ultras don’t quite fit the bill. So even though their ideologies and goals align, the Brotherhood isn’t about to wave the Nahdawy banner. “It’s also all about redirecting: putting a message out there but not taking responsibility for it,” Hellyer said.

To other opposition groups, however, the Nahdawy and the Brotherhood are one. As a result, there is a notable lack of cooperation between them and the non-Islamist opposition groups, such as the secular April 6 Youth Movement. “We may both be against the current government but we do not have the same goals,” said Mohammed Nabil, a spokesman for the movement. “My goal in April 6 is to fight injustice wherever it is. Their goal is just to bring back Morsi and that’s not my goal at all. They’re actually against us because we aren’t pro-Morsi.”

Although the April 6 Youth Movement is a far more established opposition group, Sisi’s government has managed to incapacitate it by throwing its leaders behind bars. The current regime has yet to find an effective strategy, however, for tackling groups like the Nahdawy that have no formal leadership structure. This is why el Banna considers them the hope of the anti-coup movement. “There will come a day when there will be a popular revolution again, because this government is stupid and the people are starting to realize it,” she said. “And when that day comes, they will need to cleanse all the government institutions of their corrupt leaders and the Ultras will be among those who replace them. They will be like the engine pulling the train.”

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Today, the Ultras Nahdawy have nearly 70,000 members on their official Facebook page and dozens of branches and offshoots in over 15 governorates across the country. These branches sprouted on their own and act mostly independently of each other. They have no leader or central organization, making it difficult for the government to shut them down. When branches do decide to cooperate with each other for bigger demonstrations, plans travel horizontally from one branch organizer to another, rather than being passed down vertically through a thick web of hierarchy.

“The Ultras are a way of organizing people so that we can move when the time comes to move,” said Mohammed Magdi, the branch leader for the village of Abu Rawash. “I’m in touch with the organizer from Kerdasa who is in touch with the organizer from Giza and sometimes we all gather together for a big protest. But mostly, we just organize special demonstrations in our village to protest the deaths and detentions of our neighbors and remind their families that we haven’t forgotten them.” Unlike other opposition groups who call for protests publicly on their

Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, the Ultras Nahdawy keep the times and locations of their demonstrations a secret from the general public, spreading them by word of mouth alone. This gives the police no way to prepare for them.

When the police do inevitably attack one of their demonstrations, however, the Nahdawy can rely on a subset of their members to spring into action and engage with police forces: the Maghouleen, or Unknowns. “The Maghouleen are the ones who meet the police head-on,” Faisal said, lowering his voice. “They’re an anonymous group of front-line fighters. No one knows who they are, but they are armed and will be violent if they need to be.”

The Ultras Nahdawy’s brazen defiance guarantees they will always be under threat of attack and arrest. But these young men believe they are defending their religion, and trust they have nothing to fear. “We believe in our religion that if someone dies by the hand of injustice, then he is a martyr,” said Sayid Ibrahim, an Ultras member from Abu Rawash. “So when I go down to protest, I go down in the name of God. We’ve seen death. We’ve seen everything. We aren’t afraid anymore.” As a result, instead of deterring their activity, the government’s response to the Ultras only seems to fan it. “Every time they arrest two, we get five new members who want to join,” Faisal said. “And we’ll keep growing until this government is gone.”