AFRICA UNITED

AFRICA UNITED
HOW FOOTBALL EXPLAINS AFRICA

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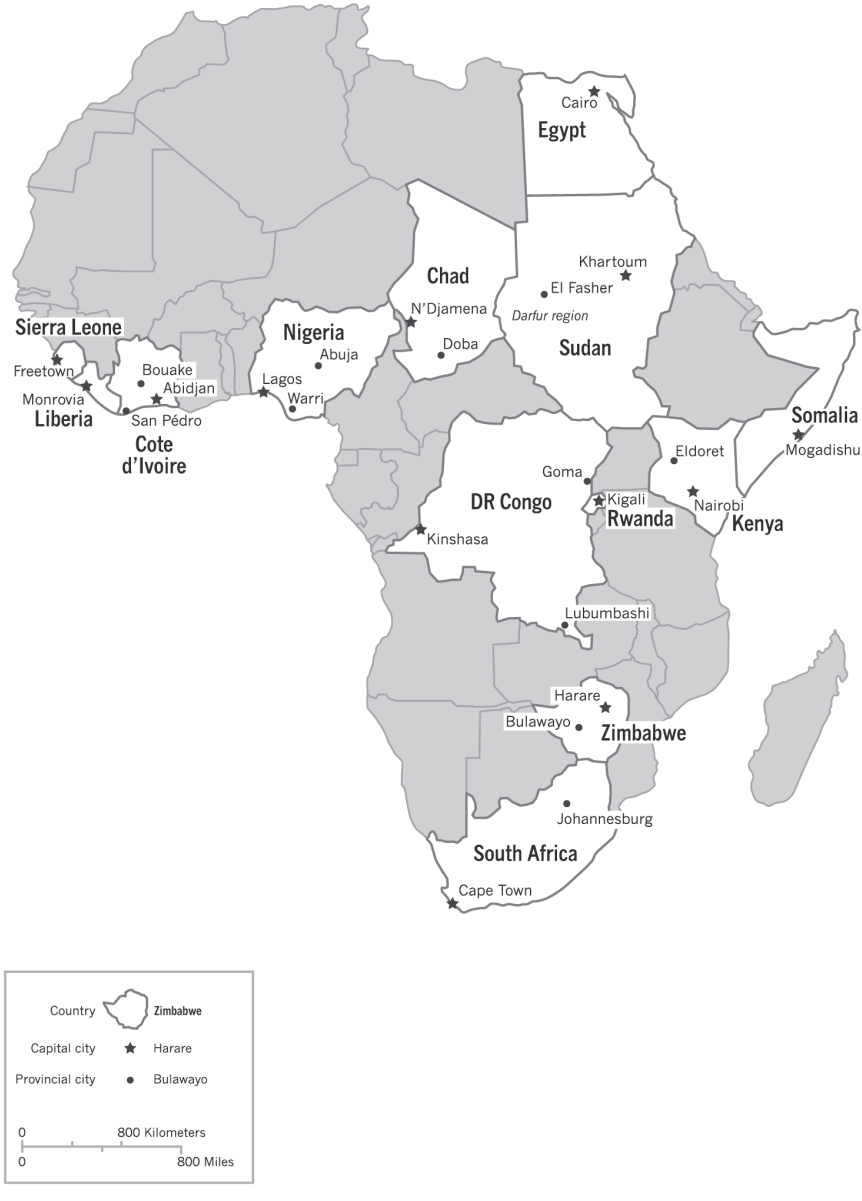
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PROLOGUE

The bus trundled through the desert, rattling over bumps that threw passengers off their seats. It was crowded and noisy, with more than forty people crammed into a vehicle made for half that number. I sat on the floor, near the back, an old woman with a small child on her lap to my right, a market trader with piles of brightly coloured material – deep blues and rich reds – stacked on his lap to my left.

We had just left Kalma, a vast, overcrowded camp for more than 90,000 Darfur refugees. As the sun began to set, and the bus continued its hour-long journey back to the town of Nyala, I flicked through my notepad and tried to make sense of what I had just seen. A woman raped, a child thrown into a burning hut, a man shot in the back as they fled. Everyone had a story to tell, a horror to relive.

Even in the camps, with international aid agencies providing water and food, few felt safe. The Janjaweed roamed nearby, attacking those who ventured beyond the confines of the camp. The Sudanese authorities were similarly feared – their armed forces had attacked villages alongside the Janjaweed.

As I read, the bus slowed to a halt. Checkpoints along this road were common. Many of the camps like Kalma had become increasingly militarised by rebel groups, and buses like this were frequently searched. From my seat on the floor I could see little out of the windows. I stretched and could just make out the top of a man's head outside and a pair of darting eyes peering in. Everyone on the bus turned to see what he was looking at. It was me.

The man outside was from Sudan's national security agency. He forced his way onto the bus and demanded to see my papers. My passport was handed from passenger to passenger until it reached the front of the bus. Then a copy of my travel permit. Then the original. Then he motioned to me to get off the bus.

I felt calm. I had the correct paperwork. It had taken endless weeks badgering the Sudanese embassy in Nairobi, countless days waiting in air-conditioned offices in Khartoum, and a few hours of drinking tea with local government officials in Nyala, but everything was in order.

My new friend didn't agree. He gestured to the bus driver and pushed me into a small hut. The bus pulled away. It was getting dark, I was in the middle of nowhere and now I was under arrest.

The hut – mud walls and a tin roof – contained an old wooden desk, a white plastic chair and a tatty mattress. Two AK-47s were propped up against a wall. Three other members of the national security agency sat on the mattress. They passed my passport and papers around, each one reading every page, analysing every stamp. I spoke little Arabic, and they spoke little English. The man who took me off the bus, a short, skinny guy with a sneer and sunglasses,

knew one word, which he repeated again and again: 'problem'.

'No problem,' I replied, again and again.

The minutes ticked by. Outside the hut the sun was rapidly setting. My mobile phone had no network, so I took out my satellite phone, a hulking blue brick with a long antenna. If I was going to spend the night here, I wanted to let friends in Nyala know what was happening. The man with the sneer snatched the phone out of my hand. 'Problem!' he shouted. 'Problem!'

We weren't getting anywhere. Two of the men on the mattress had started to doze, the third was gently singing to himself, while the Sneer kept going through the passport, one page at a time. It was hot and I was desperately thirsty. Eventually I started to drift off.

I woke with a start. There was a new presence in the hut, towering over me. More than six foot tall and almost as wide, he wore large gold-rimmed sunglasses. He looked far more important than the other men in the hut, so I stumbled to my feet. As I stood up he poked his finger in my chest. 'Problem,' he said. 'No problem,' I wearily replied. He didn't seem to agree. 'Problem. French.'

'No, not French, not French. British. I'm British.'

Suddenly everything changed.

'British?' he asked.

'Yes, British.'

'David Beckham!' he cried.

'Sorry?

'David Beckham. Friend of mine!'

'What?'

'David Beckham! He's my friend!'

'Er, yeah, he's my friend too.'

'Michael Owen! My friend also!'

'Yes, Michael Owen is friends with me too. And Steven Gerrard. We're all friends.'

'Come, come,' said Beckham's friend. He grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the hut. After a couple of minutes a car came into view. He flagged it down and started talking in quick-fire Arabic to the driver.

The only word I recognised was 'Beckham'.

The driver beamed and ushered me into the passenger seat.

'Say hello to Beckham!' yelled my one-time captor, and we sped off back to Nyala.

INTRODUCTION

Africa is a continent in flux. In the first decade of the twenty-first century Africa has been through more changes than at any time since waves of independence swept across the continent fifty years ago.

Africa has experienced record levels of economic growth, which has helped to create a small but increasingly influential middle class right across the continent. The arrival of mobile phones has had a dramatic effect, providing new opportunities to small businesses and connecting even the most rural farmer to the wider world. The spread of mobile phones has also revolutionised the finance industry, giving many people the choice of a wide range of innovative mobile banking services. Internet usage in countries like Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana and Kenya has changed the way young people interact as dramatically as it has in the West.

Africa has become increasingly urbanised, with young people drawn towards the big cities, where there is more chance of finding work. Family structures have also begun to change, with younger generations

moving into apartments rather than building a house on the family's plot.

At the forefront of Africa's most positive changes are what the economist George Ayittey has described as a generation of 'cheetahs' determined to overtake the old guard of 'hippos'. They are web designers and civil society leaders, musicians and architects.

But, at the end of the first decade, the hippos are still very much in charge. In those countries which have bothered to have elections that could be accurately described as 'democratic', the competing politicians all tend to be from the same generation of one-time liberation leaders.

While there may be new ways of thinking among younger generations, those in charge tend to stick rigidly to the economic models of the West. Encouraged by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and wealthy Western nations, African countries have followed a neoliberal economic growth model. At the 2007 Kenyan elections, the country's president, Mwai Kibaki, was able to point to a steady 6 per cent annual growth. But he remained unpopular because most people had not benefited. Kenya's capital, Nairobi, like a lot of other African cities, has become a series of contrasting enclaves of rich and poor. The rich live in gated communities of new apartment blocks, while the poor are crammed into overflowing slums. The dichotomy of the new Nairobi is summed up by the Westgate Centre, a three-storey mall selling plasma TV screens and soft furnishings. As Westgate's customers, in their shiny 4x4s, queue to get in, small children knock on their windows, begging for loose change.

There is a growing middle class in between, made up of those who live in the smart new apartment

blocks springing up in cities across the continent and who can afford an overseas holiday once a year. These middle-class professionals, university educated and comfortably well off, will likely have greater influence as the next decade evolves.

The decade has also been marked by a series of conflicts – some well known, others ignored. An estimated 5.4 million people are believed to have died in the Democratic Republic of Congo during the course of two wars. Most died from diseases which would have been prevented if the country had been at peace. In Sudan, a twenty-year civil war between the Arab-dominated north and the mainly Christian and Animist south ended in 2005, just as a more brutal conflict was taking hold in the country's western Darfur region. Some of the worst fighting has taken place in Somalia, a country of 7 million that snakes around the eastern Horn of Africa. It has been without a functioning central government since 1991 and in the past decade has become one of the world's worst humanitarian catastrophes.

Democracy has taken one step forward and two steps back. Elections in Ghana in 2008 and Sierra Leone in 2007 were heralded as great successes, but those in Nigeria, Kenya and Zimbabwe were marred by blatant rigging and unprecedented violence. There is something deeply wrong in a country where the phrase 'he died during the election' is often used.

Since independence, African leaders' relationships with foreign powers have had far more importance than their links to their own voters. During the Cold War, countries regularly played the two superpowers off against each other, in an effort to gain more money or influence. Although the Cold War has

ended, many African leaders are still able to play this game. Since the turn of the century, China has become increasingly influential in Africa. Trade between the two was valued at $2 billion in 1999. By 2005 it had risen to nearly $40 billion, and it has been estimated to soar to $100 billion by 2010, making China Africa's most important trading partner after the USA. China's main interest in Africa has been its minerals – predominantly oil – while in return it has built infrastructure: roads, railways, schools and hospitals. The Chinese have also built football stadiums, from Tanzania's new national stadium in Dar es Salaam to all four of the new stadiums used in the 2010 Africa Cup of Nations in Angola.

Football has been at the forefront of Africa's recent changes. Players such as Côte d'Ivoire's Didier Drogba and Nigeria's Nwankwo Kanu have become global stars. Think of a famous African and the names that come to mind tend to be political leaders or footballers. Mandela and Eto'o. Mugabe and Essien.

Those players have found fame in Africa, but they have made their fortune in Europe. The success of Africa's footballers in Europe reflects the economic difficulties the continent still faces. Few African countries have clubs rich enough to be able to afford the sort of wages that Drogba or Adebayor can earn in Europe. The clubs that do have enough money for this include Egyptian champions Al-Ahly, whose captain we will meet in the first chapter, and Congolese champions TP Mazembe, whose multimillionaire owner and political leader will appear in chapter five.

In most cases, though, African league football is of a poor standard. Despite the continent's love of

the game, crowds for local league matches rarely get above a few hundred, particularly if the kick-off time clashes with an English Premier League match on satellite television.

As you will see over the next ten chapters, football in Africa often reflects the political and cultural struggles that a country is experiencing. In Kenya, the divisions within the game's ruling body caused by tribe, power and money, and the debilitating effect these have on the clubs, players and fans, are a microcosm of the country as a whole.

But football can also have an incredible unifying effect. Les Éléphants of Côte d'Ivoire, who we will meet in chapter seven, helped to bring the country together during a time of civil war. Between 2002 and 2007 the country, once the economic powerhouse of West Africa, was split in two. Rebels took control of the Muslim-dominated north, while the government retained power in the south. At a time when the country was divided and issues of nationality and 'true Ivorian-ness' were being fought over, the one thing that still managed to unite the people was football.

Didier Drogba's decision, as captain of the national side, to insist that a World Cup qualifier be played in the north is widely seen as the moment when the country's peace deal, agreed just a few weeks before, looked as if it might stick.

But as we will see in the first chapter, which focuses on Egypt, some governments have taken advantage of the sense of national pride that a successful team can bring. Football diverts people's attention from the reality of their situation, and Egypt's autocratic president, Hosni Mubarak, has become skilled in the art of using that distraction to his own advantage.

The first African football team to make an impact at a World Cup tournament, the Cameroon side of 1990, was similarly used and abused by its country's president, Paul Biya. The star of the Italia '90 tournament was Cameroon's thirty-eight-year-old striker, Roger Milla, but the only reason he was at the tournament was because Biya had insisted.

Throughout the 1980s Milla had been Cameroon's star striker, playing in the team which qualified for the 1982 World Cup and won the Africa Cup of Nations – the continent's premier tournament – in 1984 and 1988.

The 1990 World Cup would be a step too far, though, and midway through the qualifying campaign Milla announced his retirement. Cameroon managed to secure a place in the World Cup without him, beating Tunisia 3–0 over two legs. But as the tournament got closer, Cameroonian football was, not for the first time and certainly not for the last, in turmoil. Competing political factions fought for control of the football federation, while the government, led by the autocratic Biya, interfered at every turn. Bonuses promised to the players hadn't materialised, and fans were starting to worry that the World Cup might be a very public embarrassment.

Biya decided Milla should play for the Indomitable Lions, as the Cameroonian national team is known. The coach, a Russian called Valeri Nepomniachi, who had been appointed by the government as a sop to the Soviet Union, didn't have any say in the matter. The president rang Milla and told him his country needed him. And Milla, like the coach, couldn't disagree.

Biya understood the power of football. The Lions' success was his success. He had come to power in

1982 but had shown a certain level of reluctance to test his popularity by holding elections. The fantastic performance of the national football team in Italy helped to deflect attention away from the less than stellar performance of Biya's government back in Youandé.

Biya eventually allowed elections in 1992, but they were far from free or fair. The opposition protested and called for a national strike on 11 October. But on 10 October the Lions were due to play Zimbabwe in a World Cup qualifier. Victory would guarantee them a place at the 1994 World Cup. And so, with uncanny timing, Biya announced that if the Lions beat Zimbabwe, then the next day would be a national holiday. They did, and the strike was called off.

Cameroon's performance at the 1990 tournament in Italy transformed the way African football was viewed by the wider world.

Egypt had played in the second World Cup back in 1934, but the continent had been forced to wait another thirty-six years before they were allowed to send another team. The refusal of FIFA, football's world governing body, to guarantee an African representative at the 1966 World Cup, held in England, prompted the seventeen African teams that had entered the qualifying competition to pull out. FIFA relented for the 1970 tournament in Mexico, granting a single place, which Morocco eventually claimed. By 1990 FIFA had grudgingly increased Africa's representation to two in a tournament with twenty-four participants, despite the impressive performances in the 1982 tournament of Algeria and Cameroon, both of whom were unlucky not to reach the second round.

African teams were supposed to turn up, play with a bit of heart, let in a sloppy goal or two, then go home. It might have been called the World Cup, but everyone knew it was essentially a tournament between the best in Europe and the best in South America. In 1990 there were no African players in the English league and only a handful in the rest of Europe. Africa was either ignored or patronised.

African football at this time was regularly dismissed as naive. They were energetic footballers, yes. Skilful, definitely. But they couldn't defend. They didn't understand tactics. During Cameroon's first match in Italia 90, against reigning world champions Argentina, the African side were described by ITV's commentator, Brian Moore, as 'a real happy-go-lucky bunch of fellas'. According to his co-commentator, Ron Atkinson, 'they get excitable'. Another commentator described them as 'brainless'.

The facts suggested otherwise. Cameroon's team in 1990 was well organised and strong at the back. In the opening match Cameroon stifled their opponents, barely letting them play, and occasionally hitting them on the counterattack with speed and skill. Things were made even harder for them when the referee sent off the midfielder Kana-Biyik for an innocuous trip on Argentina's blond-haired striker, Claudio Cannigia.

The Lions regrouped, and Biyik's brother, François Omam-Biyik, scored the winning goal, a header straight at the goalkeeper which somehow squirmed through his fingers and over the line. Agentina piled on the pressure and a second Cameroonian midfielder, Benjamin Massing, was sent off. But Cameroon held on.

An African team had beaten the world champions. It was the moment that world football began to realise it could ignore Africa no longer.

The victory over Argentina was no fluke. In their next game, against Romania, Milla came off the bench to score twice and give Cameroon a 2–1 win. Milla celebrated each goal by sprinting to the corner flag, placing one hand in front of his crotch, another above his head, and wiggling his hips. It became one of football's most iconic goal celebrations, repeated in parks and playgrounds across the world.

At the age of thirty-eight, Milla had become the World Cup's oldest goal-scorer. And they weren't just any old goals. He showed the speed and strength of a player half his age, and versatility too – scoring one with his left foot and the other with his right.

Milla's goals took Cameroon into the second round, the first time an African country had made it that far. They weren't done. Two more goals from Milla knocked out Colombia and set up a quarter-final meeting with England.

With seven minutes remaining, the Lions were leading 2–1, and deservedly so. Milla had set up both goals, getting brought down for a penalty for the first, then playing a great through ball for Ekeke to score the second.

England, driven on by Paul Gascoigne, who played probably his best game for his country that night, fought back. Gary Lineker won a penalty and got up to score it, taking the match into extra time. The game remained free-flowing with chances at both ends, until Lineker was brought down for another penalty in the 105th minute, which he duly scored.

The match ended 3–2, and Cameroon were out. The Lions were given a standing ovation by the Italian crowd. England's manager, Bobby Robson, conceded that his team were lucky to win. Never again would an African team be underestimated.

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I moved to Nairobi in 2006 to become the *Independent*'s Africa correspondent. I was eager to write uplifting, positive stories about a continent I thought had been badly let down by the Western media. The only stories that seemed to come out of Africa were about war and poverty. Surely a continent of fifty-three countries and 800 million people had more to offer than that?

It did, but news doesn't work that way. Most of the stories fitted the 'dark continent' narrative – ethnic cleansing in Darfur, civil war in Somalia, a never-ending war in Congo.

While the world – and I – focused on Africa's ills, there was another side to the continent that tended to get ignored. Africa's economic, technological and cultural renaissance has been ignored in much of the West. The continent is still known more for its dictators and rebels than for its entrepreneurs and artists.

But since Cameroon's triumph in 1990 there is one other thing that Africa has become known for, though: football. There is hardly a single major club in Europe that doesn't have at least one African player. At the 2008 Africa Cup of Nations in Ghana, thirty-four of the participating players plied their trade in the English Premier League. When Barcelona

won the UEFA Champions League in 2009, a Cameroonian, Samuel Eto'o, scored one of the goals, while an Ivorian, Yaya Touré, was the driving force in midfield.

Everywhere I've travelled – from the beaches of Freetown to the streets of Mogadishu – young boys and teenagers have been playing football. They don't even need a proper football; a bundle of plastic bags and rags tied together into a roughly spherical shape is enough.

At the weekend bars and shacks across the continent are filled with people watching European football. The English Premier League has become the UK's biggest export to Africa. Ask most football fans in Africa which team they support and they will name an English side rather than a local one. Most fans support one of the big four – Manchester United, Chelsea, Arsenal or Liverpool. No one else gets a look in.

My club, Aston Villa, may have regularly finished in the top six in recent years, but finding a Villa fan in Nairobi is impossible. Twice I've found people wearing fake replica Villa shirts. One was the 1989 pinstripes abomination with 'Mita Copiers' adorning the front; the other was the weird early-90s shirt with string on the V-neck. On neither occasion has the wearer spoken English, let alone known who Villa are.

Since 1990, African football has gradually gained more respect. FIFA increased the continent's representation in the World Cup to three in 1994 and then to five in

1998, when the tournament was expanded to thirty-two teams. The 2010 tournament will include a sixth African team.

More importantly, though, FIFA also agreed that it was time that Africa hosted the World Cup. In 2004 South Africa beat Morocco and Egypt to become the first African hosts of one of the world's biggest sporting events.

For decades African footballers have been leaving the continent to play their football. Now the world's best footballers are coming to Africa. The tournament will focus attention on African football like never before. It will also be an opportunity to shine a light on the new Africa. The continent that is constantly viewed through the prism of war, poverty and disease will get a chance to present a different face.

Ahead of the 2010 World Cup I have travelled across Africa, from Cairo to the Cape, searching for the stories which put Africa's football in context.

I've chosen thirteen countries, to be covered in ten chapters. They include some of the best on the continent and some of the worst; giants who have appeared at numerous World Cups and minnows that will struggle even to qualify for the Africa Cup of Nations, a sixteen-team tournament held every two years.

This isn't an encyclopaedia of African football. There are great teams that are not covered – Algeria in 1982, Senegal in 2002, Ghana in 2006. But this book is not just about World Cup success. It's not about goals scored and matches won.

It's about how football can rebuild a country, end a war or provide a beacon of light in a time of despair. It's the story of how Africa has been shaped by its football and how Africa is now shaping football.

And it begins in Cairo, the home of Africa's most successful footballing nation, where a crucial World Cup qualifier turned out to be much more than a football match. What happened on the pitch, and the subsequent reaction off it, prompted riots in four cities and created the biggest diplomatic incident in North Africa for more than a decade. Ambassadors were recalled, diplomatic ties were broken, and the son of Egypt's president, Hosni Mubarak, almost started a war.

1

THE PHARAOHS

Egypt

It's after the fifth body search that you begin to feel security might be an issue. Armed police have already taken my water bottle, triple-checked my wallet and raised an eyebrow at my broken phone. There are still two more lines of police to deal with.

'It's always like this for Zamalek fans,' says Ahmad Saied.

'Not for Ahly fans too?' I ask.

He just smiles.

Welcome to Al-Ahly versus Zamalek, the Red Devils versus the White Knights, the new establishment versus the old establishment. The Cairo derby is the biggest club match in Africa. They are the two most successful clubs on the continent: Zamalek have won the African Champions League five times, Al-Ahly six.

This vast metropolis of roughly 20 million people grinds to a standstill on derby day. Everyone, it seems, wants to watch the match. It's the same across the Arab world. Both clubs claim to have millions of fans (Al-Ahly supposedly have 60 million and Zamalek

30 million, although how they work that out I've no idea). When Hamas and Fatah fought each other for control of Gaza in 2007, the only day the guns fell silent was when Al-Ahly took on Zamalek.

It's not a match for the faint-hearted. In the past there have been outbreaks of violence between the two sets of fans, with petrol bombs being thrown and the occasional stabbing, although these days the heavy police presence that I've just navigated helps to keep a lid on things.

The emotion of the game often gets to the players too. Refereeing the derby has become such a gargantuan task that foreign officials have been drafted in to take control, partly because local referees are open to bribes and partly for the safety of the local referees, lest they make a decision one set of fans deems to be wrong.

I've been looking forward to the match all week; Ahmad less so. A self-effacing twenty-something Cairo native who has supported Zamalek all his life, Ahmad had to be cajoled into coming to the match.

'We're going to lose,' he says by way of explanation.

He's probably right. For while the derby maintains most of the animosity and passion that have turned it into a truly international event, the overwhelming success of Al-Ahly in recent years has begun to make it a bit of an anti-climax. Of the last fifteen matches Al-Ahly have won thirteen and drawn one. Their only defeat came in a league match which took place long after Al-Ahly had wrapped up the championship. Most of the first-team players were rested and the manager, a Portuguese called Manuel José, also decided to give it a miss, heading off to the beach and

leaving his assistant in charge. The celebrations which greeted Zamalek's 2–0 victory were muted.

As we enter the vast concrete bowl that is the Cairo International Stadium it's clear that many of Ahmad's fellow Zamalek supporters feel the same way as him. While the Ahly end is a loud, volatile, swaying sea of red, here in Zamalek country we've got the pick of the seats. 'Sometimes we put large banners over the seats to hide the empty ones,' Ahmad says. Over the course of the next two hours our end will grow to maybe two-thirds full but clearly the expectation of yet another defeat to a hated rival has kept most fans away.

Al-Ahly's recent domination has won Zamalek some sympathy though, if nothing else. Supporters of Ismaili and Suez, two of Egypt's less famous top-flight clubs, help to pad out the Zamalek end.

The Ahly fans are meanwhile chanting 'one, two, three, four, five, six' in celebration of the most recent embarrassment they have inflicted on their rivals, a 6–1 victory. Two fireworks and a flare are let off in the Ahly end.

'They took my water,' I point out.

Ahmad shrugs. 'Al-Ahly is the government club,' he says.

It wasn't always the case. When Al-Ahly was established in 1907 one of its main purposes was to help student leaders rise up against colonialism. For decades it remained the club of the working classes, while Zamalek was viewed as the club for the intellectuals and the middle classes.

Football and politics have long been interlinked here. The disastrous Six Day War with Israel in 1967 deeply affected the national psyche, shocking a country which had always believed in its own military

might. Casting around for reasons for the defeat, the government placed part of the blame on football. The national game had become a 'distraction', they claimed. Football was banned.

The 1960s had been a golden age for Egyptian football. 'Soccer stars were treated like movie stars,' Khaled Youssef, a young film-maker tells me a few days later as we eat dinner at a KFC-style diner that has become popular with Cairo's young and chic.

It took four years before the authorities could be persuaded to allow football to be played again. The revival was short-lived. In its first season back in 1971 violence between Ahly and Zamalek fans marred the Cairo derby. The rest of the season was abandoned.

The political landscape was volatile too. The aftermath of the Six Day War also saw a surge in support for radical Islamist groups, inspired by the teachings of Said Qutb, the founding father of modern-day jihadism, now practised by Osama bin Laden. Anwar al-Sadat, who took over as president following the death of Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970, tried to gain the support of Islamist groups by emphasising his visits to mosques and peppering his speeches with references to the Koran.

Egypt went to war again in 1973, launching an attack on Israel on Yom Kippur in an attempt to regain the territory lost in 1967. The war lasted seventeen days, and thousands of troops on both sides were killed. Egypt took control of the Suez Canal, but it would require peace talks with Israel before the country was able to take back the Sinai.

Those peace talks, held at Camp David in the USA in 1978, won Sadat a Nobel Peace Prize a year later. But Egypt's Islamist radicals were less impressed.

Demonstrations were held throughout the country condemning the move.

Sadat's government was less wary of football than his predecessor's had been. At a time when national pride was at a low ebb, the government viewed a successful football team as a possible panacea.

Fortunately, the national side was finally showing some promise. Egypt had won the first two Africa Cup of Nations in 1957 and 1959, although neither tournament really counted. Just three teams had taken part: Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia. After more teams began to enter, Egypt's run of glory came to an end. But during the 1978 World Cup qualifying campaign the Pharaohs were impressive. They beat Ethiopia in the first round before disposing of Kenya in the second and Zambia in the third.

The final round was a group knockout with Tunisia and Nigeria. Each team would play the others twice, home and away, and the winners would be Africa's sole representative at the World Cup in Argentina.

Egypt started disastrously, losing 4–0 away to Nigeria, but they won the return match in Cairo and then defeated Tunisia 3–2 at home a month later.

A point in the final match in Tunisia would see Egypt go through. The government chartered several planes to take fans to Tunis and promised bonuses to the players if they qualified. The World Cup would not just be good for the team, it would serve as an extraordinary boost for the country.

Egypt, though, were hammered 4–1. Tunisia represented the continent in Argentina and went on to become the first African country to win a World Cup match, beating Mexico 3–1 before going out in the group stage.

But despite the failure in Tunis a corner had been turned. Over the course of the next decade Egypt became one of African football's dominant forces. Al-Ahly and Zamalek both won the continental club title twice, and the national team won the Africa Cup of Nations when they hosted it in 1986.

By this time a new president, Hosni Mubarak, had come to power and Egypt had become a far more authoritarian state. The slide from democracy had begun in the last days of Sadat's reign. He had reacted to growing protests against his rule by introducing draconian new laws and arresting hundreds of opposition supporters. But he couldn't arrest them all. On 6 October 1981 Sadat was assassinated by a member of Jama'at al-Jihad while watching a military parade.

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For all Egypt's success at continental level, qualification for the World Cup finals eluded them. Egypt had played in the second-ever World Cup, the 1934 tournament in Italy, but that had been an invitation-only event. They lost their only match, 4–2 to Hungary.

Once countries had to qualify, Egypt struggled. The rivalry between Al-Ahly and Zamalek didn't help. Players from the two clubs often didn't get on and it seemed they cared more about how many players each club could claim in the national side rather than how well it was performing.

Failure at the 1988 Africa Cup of Nations prompted a fresh bout of introspection. Qualification for the 1990 World Cup, to be held in Italy, was about

to begin and few fans believed there was any chance of Egypt breaking their duck.

A new coach was appointed: Mahmoud El-Gohary. 'He was the first proper coach,' Khaled claims. 'He unified the team. For the first time it wasn't about Al-Ahly and Zamalek.'

El-Gohary's strategy worked. Egypt lost just one match and qualified as one of two African teams, alongside Cameroon.

'The mood of the whole nation changed,' Khaled, who is working on a film about El-Gohary's career, told me. El-Gohary's name was chanted at football matches and rallies. Interviews with him instantly boosted the circulation of the new football magazines that had begun to spring up.

Once again the league was cancelled for the good of the nation, only this time it was so that El-Gohary could have enough time to prepare his World Cup squad.

The Africa Cup of Nations, which took place in February, four months before Italia '90, was sidelined. The Olympic team was sent instead so that the main squad could concentrate solely on the World Cup.

Egypt beat Scotland and Czechoslovakia in warm-up matches and headed to Italy in high spirits. They had been drawn in what became dubbed the 'group of death' alongside England, the Netherlands and the Republic of Ireland. Every tournament seems to have one – a group of four teams with no favourite.

The first two matches both finished 1–1: England drew with Ireland, while Egypt came back from 1–0 down to draw with the Netherlands. The second set of matches had the same outcome: England versus the

Netherlands and Egypt against Ireland both finished 0–0.

Going into the final round of matches, all four teams were level. If nothing could separate the teams after three matches, FIFA officials would have to toss a coin to decide which two went through.

Egypt's match against England was the most important in their history. Victory, perhaps even a draw, would take them into the second round.

It was no less important for England. Although that World Cup is now remembered fondly in England (Platt's volley; Gazza's tears; almost, almost beating West Germany in the semis), defeat to Egypt would have been viewed as catastrophic, perhaps as embarrassing as defeat to the USA had been in 1950.

The game was poor. At half-time it was still 0–0 and neither side had really managed to create anything. That changed in the fifty-eighth minute. England won a free kick on the left-hand touchline. Gascoigne whipped it in, Mark Wright rose highest and his flicked header beat the onrushing Ahmed Shobeir in the Egyptian goal.

The 1–0 defeat knocked Egypt out, but their performances against some of the world's best players won the team plaudits at home.

El-Gohary was fêted as one of the country's greatest-ever coaches and there was optimism among the supporters that the team would be able to build on the performances in Italy and qualify in style for the next World Cup in 1994.

Instead, less than two months after the team returned to Cairo, El-Gohary was sacked.

On a rain-soaked pitch in Athens, Egypt's World Cup heroes had capitulated 6–1 in a meaningless

friendly against Greece. Back home, though, politicians in Mubarak's ruling party didn't think it quite so insignificant. The defeat had 'damaged the image of Egypt', they claimed, despite the fact that few football fans outside the country were even aware it had taken place. Parliament launched an investigation. Ignoring the first-ever qualification for a World Cup and the impressive performances in Italy, the investigation called for El-Gohary to be sacked. Which he duly was.

In the following twelve years, Egypt had fourteen national coaches. Four of them were El-Gohary. After each new disaster (knocked out in the first round of the 1991 All Africa Games, defeated by Liberia in the 1998 World Cup qualifying campaign) the cry went up 'bring back El-Gohary'. But he struggled to recreate the magic of 1990.

'We were addicted to him,' Khaled says. 'The relationship was complex. He was our father, but he was our drunk father.'

His biggest achievement was the 1998 Africa Cup of Nations victory in Burkina Faso. Mubarak was at the airport to greet the returning champions and El-Gohary was, once again, fêted as the man who could do no wrong.

As African champions, Egypt were invited to take part in the Confederations Cup the year after and initially did well, drawing 2–2 with Bolivia and holding eventual winners Mexico to the same scoreline. Things fell apart though in the easiest match, against Saudi Arabia. Egypt were humbled 5–1 and El-Gohary was sacked for a final time.

The year 2005 was the most dramatic in Egyptian politics for a generation. Mubarak's tight grip on power was weakening following a deeply flawed series of elections. At first glance the presidential elections in September had appeared to be a step in the right direction. Previously voters had merely had the chance to vote 'yes' or 'no' to the choice presented to them by parliament. Under pressure from the West to be provided with at least a semblance of democracy, Egyptians were now, for the first time, actually given a choice of candidates to vote for. Not a completely democratic choice, though. The most popular opposition party, the Muslim Brotherhood, was barred from putting up a presidential candidate. And just in case the people didn't decide to give Mubarak an overwhelming victory, his security forces and officials were on hand to ensure the right result. Ballot boxes were stuffed and, in areas where opposition support was high, security forces blocked voters from getting to polling stations, in some cases firing on people trying to vote.

The parliamentary elections in December were just as bad. Mubarak's secular opponent was locked up on forgery charges, while the Muslim Brotherhood's supporters were harassed. Opposition demonstrators took to the streets in their thousands but the security forces managed to prevent them seriously threatening Mubarak's rule.

A month after the disputed elections Egypt was due to host the Africa Cup of Nations. Desperate for something to help boost his popularity and unite the country, Mubarak turned to football. It was a strategy that had started slowly. Mubarak had begun to attend African Champions League finals featuring Al-Ahly or

Zamalek. 'He saw it was popular,' Egyptian journalist Walid al-Hosseiny told me. 'Then he started going to the Pharaohs' training camps, receiving winners at the airport . . . The pro-government media helped to highlight it. They showed it as a boost to the team.'

It reached a peak during the Africa Cup of Nations. Mubarak's regular visits to the Pharaohs' training sessions were headline news and he was careful to attend every match, trying his best to align himself with a team he hoped would be successful.

'The political regime uses football to promote itself,' said al-Hosseiny. 'He is trying to show that he is with the people. It's a constant message.'

Politics aside, the 2006 Nations Cup was to Egypt what Euro 96 was to England. Football, long the preserve of the working classes, became – briefly – a middle-class sport. Stylish young women, with henna tattoos and figure-hugging jeans and tops, were attending matches. Billboards showing stars such as the captain Ahmed Hassan advertising drinks and clothes dominated the main highways.

The team had much to prove. Egypt had, once again, failed to qualify for the World Cup. All five of the African qualifiers, including the team that knocked Egypt out, Côte d'Ivoire, were at the Nations Cup, giving the host nation the perfect opportunity to show their worth.

Egypt breezed through the opening group stage, even gaining a touch of revenge against Côte d'Ivoire, beating them 3–1. They hammered DR Congo 4–1 in the quarter-finals, and a late Amr Zaki goal gave the Pharoahs victory over Senegal in the semis.

The final against Côte d'Ivoire finished goalless after extra time. The tournament would be decided

by a penalty shoot-out. Hassan scored Egypt's first spot-kick, but Didier Drogba missed the first for Côte d'Ivoire. Both sides scored, both missed, then both scored again. Mohamed Abou Treika, the star of the tournament, stepped up to take Egypt's final penalty. He scored, Egypt won, and Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's beleaguered president, was a very happy man.

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One glance inside Al-Ahly's training complex suggests that its reputation as the club of the working classes is no longer deserved. It's almost ten o'clock on a warm Cairo evening and training has just begun. The first team squad jogs gently around the pristine pitch while the club's members sit around tables on the perimeter, drinking fresh fruit juice and sodas. All of them have paid an annual fee of 50,000LE – the equivalent of £5,500 – to become members of Al-Ahly.

The training session – the last before the derby with Zamalek – is light. As the players wander off the pitch an hour or so later, the members finish their drinks and pay their bills. Their children race round to the front entrance to wait for the stars to emerge. Clutching expensive camera-phones, they scream and yell as each first-team player steps out. The players dutifully pose for pictures before heading off to the car park. The loudest screams are reserved for Ahmed Hassan.

Egypt's captain, Hassan was the face of the victorious Africa Cup of Nations team in 2006. He's one of the few Egyptian players who have made a successful move to Europe and is one of the world's

most-capped players, with more than 160 appearances for the national team.

After more than a decade in Turkey and Belgium, including spells at Besiktas and Anderlecht, Hassan decided to return to Cairo this season. Zamalek and Al-Ahly both fought for his signature, but even Zamalek fans expected him to go to their rivals. Al-Ahly had benefited from a certain amount of stability. In the six years that Manuel José was in charge of Al-Ahly (from 2003 to 2009), Zamalek had no fewer than twelve different managers. Al-Ahly also had more money.

My friend Ahmad Saied knows Hassan well and has arranged for the three of us to meet. Hassan spots us through the crowd and motions towards the car park. He opens the door to a brand-new red Porsche Cayenne, a big jeep-like model with leather seats and built-in TV screens, and we head off.

The whole thing seems faintly bizarre. It's midnight and I'm in a Porsche with Egypt's captain driving around Cairo. We stop outside a rather tired-looking three-storey building in a residential area. Hassan owns a limousine hire company which has its offices here. It may be past midnight but he still needs to finish some paperwork.

We go upstairs to his main office and Hassan switches on the TV. Egypt's coach, Hassan Shehata, is on a discussion show talking about the Pharaohs' victory over DR Congo in Kinshasa the week before. The win, in front of 60,000 pumped-up Congolese fans, gave Egypt a big boost in their quest for World Cup qualification.

'This generation has the best chance,' Hassan says as he puts his coach on mute. 'We have the perfect ingredients of veterans and young players.'

Hassan is now one of the veterans. He has played in six Nations Cups, with Egypt finishing three of them as champions. But his dream has always been to play in the World Cup. He was too young to play in 1990 and has since seen his chance to appear on the world's biggest stage fall apart at the last moment time and time again.

Another North African side has almost always been responsible for Egypt's demise. Tunisia knocked them out in 1978, while it was Morocco that dashed their hopes in both 1982 and 1986. Tunisia again put paid to their chances in 1998 and a combination of Morocco and Algeria saw them miss out in 2002. In 2006, defeat away to Libya certainly didn't help, but they still would have missed out to Côte d'Ivoire.

'Egypt play better when we play in tournaments,' Hassan says. 'Away from home in one-off matches we've been very bad. In the qualifying rounds . . .' He trails off before snapping back: 'We've recently started to get that mentality to win away.'

Having an Egyptian coach has helped. Shehata took over from an Italian, Marco Tardelli, in 2004. Tardelli had won the World Cup with Italy in 1982, scoring one of the three goals in the final before setting off on one of football's most iconic goal celebrations – arms open, fists clenched, shaking his head in disbelief.

But Tardelli struggled, Hassan argues, to understand how to deal with Egyptian footballers.

'The coach now, he knows how to be psychologically with Egyptian players,' Hassan says. 'But if we lose, everyone says, "Ah, we have to have a foreign coach." They are not always the best.'

Hassan is one of the few Egyptian stars to make it in Europe. In the past few years players like Mido, Amr Zaki and Hossam Ghaly have endured a horrendous time in England. Zaki started the 2008–9 season brilliantly for Wigan but ended it dubbed the 'most unprofessional player I've ever worked with' by his manager, Steve Bruce, after he failed to return from international duty with Egypt for a fourth time.

'Egyptian players have our traditions, which contradict with our professions,' Hassan argues. 'We are out all the time. Cairo is always awake. This is why we don't succeed abroad.'

He looks at his watch. 'It's now after midnight. Would you be interviewing an English footballer at this time?'

He has a point. Ahmad Saied and I thank him for his time and head off.

As Hassan said, Cairo is a city that's always awake. It's one o'clock in the morning but the downtown markets are still open. Women haggle for a good price for a bag of oranges; the city's young and cool, wearing sunglasses at night, check out each other as much as the jeans and tops. Despite the time, children run down the street playing with fireworks. Old men sit on plastic chairs along the pavement.

We head to a local restaurant to eat mezes. Most of the tables are full with families and there are children running about. At several tables people are smoking shishas – fruit-flavoured tobacco which is filtered through an ornate metal pot. Egyptians see themselves as Arabs rather than Africans and this certainly feels like an Arab city.

I was told a story, possibly apocryphal, when I first came to Cairo. An Egyptian diplomat, newly

appointed as ambassador to Zimbabwe, is greeted at Harare airport by the foreign minister.

'Welcome to Zimbabwe,' the foreign minister says.

'Thank you,' replies the ambassador. 'It's my first time in Africa.'

I understand what the ambassador meant. Cairo appears more modern, more developed, more Western than any African city I've been to. There are flyovers and eight-lane highways, pavements and working streetlights. There are shiny new branches of Nokia, Nike and HSBC, while McDonald's and Pizza Hut are here too – and they deliver.

It's a sprawling metropolis of bungalows and apartment blocks and slum huts and mansions, spreading for mile after mile along and away from the banks of the Nile. Satellite dishes, beaming in bad American movies, Italian gameshows and Arab news networks, litter the rooftops. From my hotel room, fourteen floors up, I can count more than 150 dishes.

Smart new coffee shops on the banks of the Nile have free Wi-Fi. The Internet has taken off in a big way, and Ahmad Saied is one of those who has benefited. He writes for a football website called filgoal.com, which covers Egyptian and European football in both Arabic and English. The stories are far more interesting than those found in the daily newspapers, and thanks to a sponsorship deal with a mobile phone company Ahmad's pay is better too.

He's a big Arsenal fan, and we spend an hour or so over dinner discussing their chances of winning the Premier League ('not good'), Zamalek's odds of winning anything ('really not good') and Egypt's chances of qualifying for the World Cup.

'We will be fine,' he says, 'so long as we aren't drawn in the same group as another North African side.'

When the draw for the final qualifying round is made a few months later, I wince. Egypt have to play Zambia, Rwanda and Algeria. Only the top team will make it to South Africa.

The campaign starts badly with a defeat against Algeria. After the match I get a text from Ahmad. 'It's always the North African teams,' he writes.

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In the summer of 2009, with Egypt's qualification for the World Cup looking precarious, they get an opportunity to test themselves against some of the best teams in the world. The Confederations Cup, held the year before every World Cup, is contested between the six continental champions, the World Cup winners and the next World Cup hosts.

Egypt, representing Africa, are drawn in the same group as South American champions Brazil, World Cup winners Italy and North and Central American winners the USA. They play brilliantly against Brazil in the first game, losing 4–3 to a last-minute penalty, before shocking Italy in their second game, winning 1–0.

Victory against the USA – a team far weaker than Brazil and Italy – will put Egypt into the semi-finals. A draw might also be enough. In the end even a 2–0 defeat will see them go through, since Brazil beat Italy in the other game. But Egypt lose 3–0.

Later that summer Al-Ahly are invited to London to take part in a pre-season tournament at Wembley.

For the other three teams involved – Barcelona, Celtic and Tottenham – it's a chance to prepare for the new season. For Al-Ahly, though, it's another opportunity for Egypt to prove its football deserves to be taken seriously on the international stage. It's just a pity no one told the players.

Al-Ahly come to Wembley as African champions, having beaten Coton Sport of Cameroon in the final of the African Champions League the previous November. The team isn't at full strength but still includes Ahmed Hassan and one of Africa's most creative forwards, Mohamed Abou Treika, who is playing in England for the first time.

Wembley Stadium isn't even a quarter full by the time Al-Ahly and Celtic kick off. I'm keen to see how Abou Treika performs and have hyped him up to friends at home. Al-Ahly start well and Abou Treika is at the centre of every half-decent attack they put together. But it doesn't take long to realise this isn't going to be pretty. Some slapstick Ahly defending presents Celtic with the lead midway through the first half, a lead which they double shortly afterwards when the goalkeeper gives away a penalty. A third, fourth and fifth follow far too easily in the second half.

The second match against Barcelona two days later isn't quite so embarrassing. Yes, Al-Ahly lose 4–1, and yes, the Barca team is mainly made up of teenagers, but for the first half at least Al-Ahly play some good football. Abou Treika again shows some nice touches, although nothing to suggest he's the best player in Africa, as the BBC claimed earlier in the year.

After the second match I meet up with Hossam al-Badri, the new coach of Al-Ahly. After seven years Manuel José has moved on. Al-Badri was José's

assistant, but the transition has not been smooth. 'He is difficult to follow but we will do well,' he says. 'Our team today was not full – we had many injuries,' he adds. 'You saw the Confederations Cup. You can see that we can perform.'

He's right, but the same Egypt side which played so well against two of the best teams in the world made a disastrous start to their World Cup qualifying group. With just four games remaining the Pharaohs' World Cup campaign is in a mess. They win the next three, setting up a crucial final match with Algeria in Cairo.

A 3–0 win would send Egypt through, while a two-goal victory would leave both sides level on points and with the same number of goals scored and conceded. A play-off in Khartoum would be required to separate them. If Egypt won 1–0 or failed to win at all, then Algeria would go through.

It's four and a half hours before the match kicks off but Cairo International Stadium is already full to capacity. Over-capacity, in fact. Having fought my way through a huge crush at the gate, while armed police looked on impassively, I try to find a seat. No luck – I have to make do with perching on a step in the gangway. Officially, there are 75,000 people in the stadium. Unofficially, estimates range from 90,000 to 120,000.

'Football represents a malfunction in our society,' Ahmed Hassan has told me. 'People are so interested in football it diverts attention from their reality, from the social and economic problems.'

In the run-up to the crunch match with Algeria, the Egyptian government has done its best to divert attention. Mubarak, now eighty-one, is widely believed to be considering stepping down at the next election, scheduled for 2011. The man expected to take over from him is his son, Gamal. Taking a page out of his father's PR handbook, Gamal has visited the Pharaohs' training camp a few days before the match. It was the day's top news story.

Opposition groups have begun campaigning against Gamal's expected coronation, and there appears to be little popular support for him on the streets, but the criticism stopped as the match got closer. 'This week no opposition will talk about elections or the grooming of the president's son or prices rising,' says al-Hosseiny. 'There will be no criticism. If we win it will be the same up to the World Cup. The only thing Egypt will talk about is football.'

After Egypt won the 2006 Africa Cup of Nations, food prices – controlled by the government – rocketed. It was the only time the government thought they could get away with it – and they were right.

For the Algeria match the Egyptian government has also been able to call upon decades of resentment between the two countries. Few rivalries in Africa are as fierce as this one. A qualifier for the 1984 Olympics ended in a riot, while a World Cup qualifier in 1989 led to fighting in the VIP area, with Algerian players throwing pot plants at FIFA officials. Algeria's one-time African player of the year, Lakhdar Belloumi, was accused of smacking the Egyptian team doctor in the face with a bottle, blinding him in one eye. An Interpol arrest warrant for Belloumi was dropped

in 2009 only after a personal request was made by Algeria's president.

For days before the match Egyptian television has been endlessly screening short films showing slow-motion shots of Egypt scoring against Algeria in previous matches, flag-waving Egyptian fans and an applauding President Hosni Mubarak – all set to emotional music.

Another film reminds Egyptians of the debt Algeria still owes them for helping to win their independence. Grainy footage shows Egypt's former president Gamal Abdel Nasser being cheered by crowds in Algiers and Algerian troops being trained by Egypt.

Despite the foreign ministers of both countries appealing for calm and organising 'peace' concerts featuring Algerian and Egyptian artists, the atmosphere in the lead-up to the match has been increasingly febrile. Abuse flows in newspapers and on Internet forums. An Algerian newspaper prints a picture of the Egyptian team with their heads replaced by those belonging to Egyptian actresses. An Egyptian rival responds by printing pictures of the Algerian team dressed as belly dancers. The rivalry also affects marriages. An Egyptian woman leaves her Algerian husband after the couple have an argument about the match.

Algeria went to great lengths to ensure the team was able to prepare properly. Fearing food poisoning in the team's hotel, they brought their own chefs, ingredients, even a team of waiters. A hotel was chosen deep within the airport complex to prevent Egyptian fans playing music and blaring car horns outside to stop the team sleeping before the match.

The fevered atmosphere almost inevitably turned to violence. As the coach carrying the Algerian

team left Cairo International Airport, a group of Egyptian fans pelted it with rocks. They smashed the windows and hit four of the players, cutting two of them badly on their heads. The Egyptian FA tried to argue it hadn't happened. A police spokesman told reporters the Algerians had smashed the windows from the inside, a bizarre claim backed up by the bus driver, who was interviewed on television recounting how angry Algerian players had wanted to yell at the Egyptian fans but couldn't open the windows. Neither the police, the bus driver nor Egypt's television commentators could explain how the Algerian players got their injuries, though.

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The roar which greets Egypt's first goal is deafening. Amr Zaki, the former Wigan striker, has given the Pharaohs the lead after two minutes. Mohammed, the KPMG accountant who has very kindly allowed me to share his small patch of concrete with him, jumps up and down and turns to hug me. The Algerian players look in shock, as well they might. Two of them, the defender Rafik Halliche and the midfielder Khaled Lemmouchia, are still nursing head injuries sustained in the attack on the team coach. The febrile atmosphere they face in Cairo International Stadium is intimidating. Every time an Algerian touches the ball a cacophony of boos and whistles rings out.

Egypt need a second goal to force a play-off, a third to win outright. But as the match progresses they struggle to break down Algeria's strong defence.

For most of the second forty-five minutes Algeria do not venture out of their own half. The crowd is getting restless. A roar rises every time a cross is flung into the penalty area, replaced by a groan when yet again the Algerian defenders head it clear.

Mohammed is chain-smoking, anxiously glancing at the clock on the scoreboard every few minutes. Before the match he predicted a 2–0 win – now he's not so sure. 'We're not creating any chances,' he says, between puffs.

As the clock ticks down, Algeria begin to waste time. Every time the ball goes out of play another Algerian player falls to the ground demanding treatment. It's little surprise that the referee chooses to add on six minutes.

Egypt need all six. The match is in its final minute when the ball comes to Sayed Moawad, on the left-hand side of the penalty area. His cross is deep, for once evading Algeria's big centre-back Madjid Bougherra. Egypt's substitute, Emad Moteab, rises to meet it at the far post, heading it back across the goal and towards the far corner. The ball seems to trickle slowly towards the goal line. The goalkeeper can't reach it. Egypt have done it.

I've never heard a roar as loud as this. All the pent-up emotion of the last ninety minutes, the last month of build-up, the last twenty years of World Cup failure, is released at that moment.

The goal sparks a pitch invasion by Egypt's bench and everyone else whose route to the players isn't blocked by a fence: ball boys, stewards and photographers. Around me in the stands grown men are weeping. A dozen firecrackers go off and smoke drifts across the pitch.

Half an hour after the final whistle, the stadium is still full. 'How much is a flight to Khartoum?' Mohammed asks me.

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After the euphoria of Cairo, where the celebrations came to an end only when the sun rose the next day, comes the crushing anti-climax of Sudan. The Egyptian and Algerian governments each chartered dozens of planes to fly thousands of supporters to the play-off match in the Al-Merreikh Stadium in Omdurman, Khartoum's twin city on the opposite side of the Nile. The tickets had been split between Algerians, Egyptians and locals, although judging by the green and white flags the majority of locals were supporting Algeria.

Whether it was the lack of support from the crowd or tiredness from the previous match, Egypt were poor. Algeria took the lead at the end of the first half, and despite dominating possession in the second half Egypt struggled to create many chances. When they did, Algeria's young goalkeeper was in the way. At the final whistle Egypt's players sank to their knees. After all that, Egypt were out.

The political repercussions overshadowed the football. Egypt had failed to qualify for the World Cup because they weren't good enough. But this fact did not fit with the Mubarak regime's narrative. Luckily for the president, there was a very convenient enemy to blame, one that many Egyptians could unite against: Algeria.

After the first match in Cairo the Algerian media had claimed, wrongly, that eight Algerians had been

killed in Cairo. Fans in Algiers attacked the offices of EgyptAir and an Egyptian phone company. The Algerian government then accused the phone company of failing to pay taxes.

Sudan had provided 15,000 police, many of them armed, to keep the two sets of fans apart at the stadium. But after the match there were clashes, and the Egyptian media reported claims that Algerians had attacked Egyptians with knives while the Sudanese police looked on.

Egypt recalled its ambassador from Algiers, Algeria threatened to do the same with its man in Cairo, while the Sudanese also became embroiled, demanding an explanation from the Egyptian ambassador to Khartoum for the negative press stories about Sudanese security.

There was something fundamentally depressing about all of this. The road to South Africa had brought a country together. But that unity had been hijacked by the country's regime. Unemployment in Egypt, particularly among the young, is incredibly high. While the country's GDP has grown steadily over the past decade, thanks to the liberalisation of the economy encouraged by the IMF and the World Bank, the vast majority of Egypt's population have not got richer. Prices have continued to rise, leaving millions across the country in poverty. There's no real democracy. In 2008 thousands rioted over the price of bread. In a rare moment of people power the government lowered the price. But that victory has not encouraged more demonstrations. There's a simmering anger and resentment in the country, particularly among the young, and at the moment football is one of the only outlets for it.

'The Egyptian national team is the only thing that all Egyptians are unanimous about,' said al-Hosseiny. 'There are always two sides to everything else – politics, religion . . . Football is the only thing that unifies us.'

There was a moment when I wondered whether the crowds, the hundreds of thousands who had taken to the streets to celebrate Egypt's victory, might take their anger out on their government. It wasn't hard to find someone to say something bad about the government. Quite the opposite. In public squares and tea shops across the city I heard only negative words about Mubarak and his regime.

As Egypt's captain, Ahmed Hassan, had said to me: football diverts attention from reality. The football might have been over, but Algeria was still the enemy. As the rhetoric between the two countries increased, Mubarak's elder son, Alaa, went on television.

'We have to take a stand,' he said. 'This is enough. That's it! This is enough. Egypt should be respected. We are Egyptian and we hold our head high, and whoever insults us should be smacked on his head.'

That night a crowd of 2,000 attacked the Algerian embassy in Cairo, throwing stones, bricks and petrol bombs.