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Significant headway in Egypt

Democratization progress - Egypt moved towards a multi-party democracy by the High Court's decision to ban the former ruling party NDP (1978-2011) and nationalise its assets on the ground of its monopolising the power. It termed recent changes a "*glorious revolution*" and acceded so to another substantial demand of the protesters, similarly to Tunisia's month old ban of Ben Ali's Rally for Constitutional Democracy.

Justice - In a similarly significant move, ex-president Mubarak and his two sons were taken into custody: father was flown from Sharm el Sheikh into a military hospital, his two sons joined ex-PM Ahmed Nazif, ex-minister of interior Adli and the steel-tycoon Ahmed Ezz in the notorious Tora prison. The Mubaraks are to be detained for 15 days for questioning by the so called Illicit Gains Authority.

These decisions were taken after renewed massive protests on Tahrir square. For two weeks protestors have targeted the army's strong handed tactics and army's head, the Marshall Tantawi himself.

Gas - PM Essam Sharraf has directed the review of all gas contracts Egypt agreed to with all countries, including Jordan and Israel, in order to achieve higher returns for Egypt. Egypt supplies an estimated 40% of Israel's gas under the controversial deal.

Stalemate inside Libya, diplomatic moves outside

Fighting in Libya remains stalled around the cities of Ajdabiya and Misrata, still held by the rebels. Qaddafi was accused of using cluster bombs in Misrata.

In the Qatari capital, Doha Britain's foreign secretary William Hague and the Qatari prime PM Hamed bin Jassem chaired a first session of the international Libya "contact group" to explore ways ahead in the face of military impasse between the Qaddafi regime and the rebels. The Libya Contact Group for the first time forcefully called for Qaddafi to step down and recognized instead the Transitional National Council in Benghazi as legitimate. They affirmed that Qaddafi has lost the legitimacy to rule. As a result, Benghazi will likely be provided with cash, possibly including funds belonging to the Libyan government, frozen in NATO countries.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy, British Prime Minister David Cameron, and US President Barack Obama published a joint op-ed in three newspapers on April 15. They make it clear that the UN allies will not permit Muammar Qaddafi to remain in power.

Harsh repression and mild concessions in Syria

Protests - On April 15, in the biggest day of protests in Syria so far, tens of thousands of Syrians demonstrated against the Baathist regime in the Douma suburb of Damascus, but were prevented by the police from reaching the center of the capital. In the southern city of Deraa, which has been the epicentre of unrest, 20,000 are said to have rallied against the government. Crowds also chanted in the streets against the government in Latakia, Homs, Baniyas and Jassan, as well as in the Kurdish areas. There were few casualties on Friday in Syria, which AP suggests may have reflected a regime strategy to minimize deaths of protesters.

Violence - Syrian soldiers have been shot by security forces after refusing to fire on protesters. Witnesses told al-Jazeera and the BBC that some soldiers refused to shoot after the army had moved into Baniyas in the wake of intense protests on Friday.

Assad's active reaction to protests - On April 17, Bashar Assad held a second televised speech since the beginning of the protests. It was less

arrogant, similarly adamant to stay out the crisis without substantial reforms, yet acknowledging the deep gap between the people and the government.

The speech followed a series of concessions clearly intended to placate two distinct and politically crucial groups – the Islamists and the Kurds. Assad fulfilled a decades-old demand by granting citizenship to thousands among Syria's long-ostracized Kurds, fired local officials, released some detainees, formed a new government and allowed Islamists to form a party and start a television station. He further promised to lift the nation's decades-old emergency law this week, even as he announced a series of strong counter-terrorism laws. The president has also met with religious and tribal leaders from Daraa and Banyas, and with relatives of those killed in the Damascus suburb of Douma.

Developments in Tunisia, Yemen, Bahrain

Financial Support for Tunisia - The World Bank is working with Tunisia on \$500 million in budget support, which could leverage an additional \$700 million from other donors. The European Union itself will provide up to €140 million in extra aid to Tunisia over the next three years, José Manuel Barroso, announced on April 12. Barroso made clear that Tunisia's interim government has to clamp down on illegal migration. More than 20,000 Tunisian migrants have arrived in Italy since the ousting three months ago of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali.

Stalemate in Yemen - Hundreds of thousands of Yemenis demonstrated throughout the country, in Sanaa, Taizz, Hudeida and Ibb while the pro-government protest was smaller and only comes out for a short period every Friday afternoon. Efforts to negotiate a transfer of power in Yemen have floundered on the question of how president Ali Abdullah Saleh should abdicate. The Arab Gulf states, who have been trying to mediate, want him to be granted immunity from prosecution in return for leaving office but the Yemeni opposition refused to let him go without a trial. Thousands of Yemeni women demonstrated against Saleh on Saturday in Sanaa and Taizz, saying "We will not be silent!" They were protesting his complaint on Friday that there was gender mixing in the public rallies, which he said was contrary to Muslim culture, and his call for them to remain home.

The **Bahrain** government has backed off its plan to dissolve the Wifaq Party and one other. Wifaq is the largest Shiite party in the small Arab sheikhdom, representing some 60% of the citizen population that is Shiite.

Protests

In Iraq, demonstrators demanded the resignation of PM al-Maliki in Baghdad. In Mosul protests demanded the immediate withdrawal of US troops and the release of political prisoners. In Amman, **Jordan**, 1000 protesters gathered downtown on Friday to demand the resignation of the PM and greater democratic freedoms. In **Saudi Arabia** about a thousand protesters rallied in the eastern Saudi city of Qatif to protest against Saudi Arabia's participation in the crackdown on Shiites in Bahrain.

Quote

"Our duty and our mandate under UN Security Council Resolution 1973 is to protect civilians, and we are doing that. It is not to remove Gaddafi by force. But it is impossible to imagine a future for Libya with Gaddafi in power... It is unthinkable that someone who has tried to massacre his own people can play a part in their future government."
PM Cameron, pres. Obama and pres. Sarkozy in a joint op-ed