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Violent stalemate: Libya, Syria

In central **Libya** Qadhafi's forces retook the oil port Ras Lanuf and fighting rages around Brega. The advances by Qadhafi's forces were facilitated by bad weather that grounded NATO-led coalition forces. The rebels attempt to bring more professionalism into their fighting. According to al-Jazeera, the rebels receive training and equipment from Egypt. Meanwhile, the Libyan foreign minister Musa Kusa defected to the UK, further splitting Qadhafi's elite.

Libyan opposition seeks a political solution to the stalemate on ground. It set terms of ceasefire, rejected by Qadhafi subsequently. The opposition stroke a deal on oil export with Qatar.

Syria organised mass support demonstrations in larger cities and the government resigned. After president Asad's defiant speech on 30 March, protests continued, although in smaller numbers and under heavy police presence. Dozens were arrested and dozens were killed by police and plain cloth militia in Dera'a, Homs and in Douma in Damascus. In Latakia crowds were prevented to set a protest camp and in the North Kurds have joined protests. On 3 April, the president named a new PM, Adel Safar, the former minister of agriculture.

Egypt

Transition rules – on 30 March, the Supreme Military Council released a revised constitutional decree that will act as a temporary constitution, replacing the suspended 1971 one until a new constitution is drafted. Among other things, it reduced the authorities of the Shoura Council (senate) and it retained a Mubarak-era provision mandating that 50 percent of the parliament consist of workers and farmers.

Political change - Deputy Prime Minister Yehia al-Gamal held on 30 March what the government considered to be comprehensive “national dialogue” with 160 representatives of various political forces, intellectuals, public figures and youth of the 25 January revolution. 27 Egyptian human rights organizations criticized the government for excluding certain political forces from the process. Among those not included were Wafd, Tagammu, Nasserist and Ghad parties, as well as representatives of human rights and civil society organizations.

The Egyptian military has fired three top officials from the country's state-run television and radio institutions. The government also sacked several state newspaper editors and officials.

Renewed protests – 4000 have demonstrated on a “Save the Revolution” Friday on Tahrir square and more groups in other cities, largely against the military's lack of action against former regime figures and structures. After being hailed as the country's saviours, heavy military hand in breaking up demonstrations and credible allegations of torturing arrested protesters have lowered the army's credibility.

At least 5,000 people have been arrested and tried in military courts since Mubarak dismissed his government and sent the armed forces into the streets on 28 January, acc. to Mona Seif from

the Hisham Mubarak Law Center. They face military tribunals instead of civilians ones.

Religious politics – Islamists did not appear in the protests, despite the pleas of their younger members. The rift within MB widened, as Ibrahim al-Zaafarani, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood's Shura Council, and Abdel Moneim Abouel Fotouh, one of the Brotherhood's iconic leaders, have both officially resigned from the group. Al-Zaafarani said that Brotherhood Supreme Guide Mohamed Badie's statement that members may not join parties other than the group's planned Freedom and Justice Party was one reason behind his resignation.

Supreme Council for Sufi Orders organised a protest on 29 March to denounce the demolition of the estimated 16 shrines and historic Sufi mosques that were targeted by members of the Salafi movement acc. to, Sheikh Gaber Kasem al-Kholy, the highest Sufi Sheikh in Alexandria. The protest was joined by a number of leaders of the Shia community in Egypt.

The Salafist organisation *Gama'at al-islamiyya* is headed by repented extremists who are set to compete for votes; so is the popular television preacher Amr Khaled.

Palestine – Protesters met in Cairo last week to demonstrate against the sell of Egyptian oil and gas to Israel, following a ruling by Supreme Court that allowed such trade. According to the opponents of the ruling, Egypt might be trading with Israel at prices lower than regional standards.

Chaotic normalcy – Football matches have resumed after weeks-long interruption, only to lead to an incident, when angry Egyptian attacked the players of a Tunisian team. Egyptian PM apologised to Tunisia, as well as Egyptian public on Facebook.

Elsewhere

Massive protests continue in **Yemen**. A coalition of opposition groups called for a transitional unity government under the current vice-president.

In **Tunisia** demonstrators demand further lifting of restrictions on hijab in public space after the government allowed hijab ID pictures. Over the past two months, the United Nations says that more than 10,000 Tunisians have arrived by boat on the Italian island of Lampedusa, a gateway to Europe.

Quote

“**The military council is inexplicably slow in responding to our demands,**” said Mohammad el-Qassas, a leader of the youth wing of the Muslim Brotherhood and a member of the 25 January coalition. “**Protests and popular pressure must return, because they are only the real method of realizing the people's demands.**”(NYT)

Expected events

In April, Fatah and Hamas will hold talks in Cairo, planning to overcome internal division and restore Palestinian national unity. The Syrian PM will form a government and “study the possibility of lifting the martial law” and other ways to quell protests.