A Return of Armies to the Forefront of Arab Politics?

Philippe Droz-Vincent

Abstract

Arab armies are closed and secretive actors. Yet they have been propelled to the fore in 2011, acting as midwifes and active participants in the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt. Their posture *vis-à-vis* incumbent regimes is crucial in other Arab countries too - Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria - as the wave of popular uprisings against authoritarian regimes has spread. In view of this, there is an essential need to understand what kind of actors Arab armies are. The nature of armies in authoritarian settings shapes the pattern of resilience or of breakdown for regimes facing popular uprisings, and the prospect for various transition countries in the Arab world.

Keywords: *Armed forces / Arab countries / Domestic policy / Authoritarianism / Egypt / Tunisia / Libya*

A Return of Armies to the Forefront of Arab Politics?

by Philippe Droz-Vincent[*]

Introduction

Arab countries today are at a critical juncture, a major watershed in political life that opens up directions of change and forecloses others. The turning point was the ousting of two presidents (Tunisia, Egypt) and the severe contestation of other rulers (Bahrain, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Oman, Morocco, Algeria, etc.) that has acted as an unprecedented crossroads in a region where the political "encephalogram" has remained flat for decades. The gist of change is a radical questioning by massive and peaceful social mobilizations of the manner in which political power has been exerted over the last 30 years in the Middle East, namely authoritarian regimes. The diffusion of these mobilizations by images (*Al-Jazirah*, *Al-Arabiya*) and emulation/imitation (social networks like Facebook and Twitter) has created a domino effect across the Arab world. Societal dynamics have defeated the institutional dynamics of enduring authoritarianism (regime/society relations, military/regime relations, truncated pluralism, controlled economic liberalization, etc) under the blows of mass demonstrations. But some institutional actors, namely armies, have also played a crucial role in these transitions. Armies have played the role of midwife for transitions in Tunisia and Egypt, in which the military refused to shoot at protesters, thereby easing the end of both regimes. The army has also been involved in repression in Bahrain, Oman, Syria, and Yemen. In Yemen, the army has begun to fracture; in Libya, the army imploded in the first "days of anger", and then has participated in the repression after the Gaddafi regime rebuilt its coercive apparatus. This paper investigates what kind of actors armies are. They have been part and parcel of authoritarian settings for decades, viewed as the backbone of authoritarian rule. Authoritarian rulers have exerted extensive control through, and in some cases, deep engineering within, armies. But the latter have faced a real challenge when called upon to shoot at mass non-violent demonstrations. Armies are crucial factors in 2011 to understand the capacity of Middle Eastern regimes to withstand (or not) the new challenge of social mobilization, and, thereafter, the prospect of transition or of civil war.

1. Regime engineering in or control of the military

Over the last four decades, the military in the Arab world has been an integral institution within authoritarian regimes.[1] Yet the core of authoritarian regimes has not

been the military as a corps. Even in countries where rulers have hailed from the military, there has been a creeping "civilianization" or a "demilitarization" of political systems.[2] The influence of the military qua military has receded. The crux of authoritarianism has been the control of the state apparatus by a few networks of family members, high bureaucrats, political elites, economic cronies, and high officers linked to the president or king. The core of day-to-day authoritarian governance has been the state's control over society (the "étatization of society"), namely the ability of the state to encompass numerous social processes within the ambit and control grid of its bureaucratic and police apparatus.

The police in particular has played an essential role as an administrative arm of the state, often the ultimate decision-maker in day-to-day politics and social life. The police has not only been a repressive body (although it has zealously played that role), policing public spaces and foiling attempted mobilizations from below. It has also been (alongside the secret services, i.e., the dreaded *mukhabarat*) an essential go-between on numerous administrative matters, from solving local conflicts to issuing of bureaucratic papers and authorizations. The official state of emergency law in place for decades in the Arab world (1963-2011 in Syria and 1981-2011 in Egypt) has provided security forces with powers to censor, monitor, and detain in a state of "lawlessness", in which policy forces have acted in impunity. As a corollary, an essential difference should be made between the military and the security forces (ordinary police, special units, secret police, riot police, etc.). Regimes have developed tentacular police apparatuses that have been at the forefront of social repression, whereas the army have remained in a "quietist" position. In their day-to-day workings, authoritarian regimes have been much more police states than military regimes.

Authoritarian regimes, while not military regimes *per se*, have seen the army acting as the backbone of their rule at crucial moments. In Egypt, when the Central Protection Forces (*Quwwat al-Amn Al-Markazi* = paramilitary forces) rioted over low salaries in 1986, the Egyptian army deployed one quarter of its forces to suppress the rebellion. Again in 1997, at the peak of the offensive launched by armed Islamists against the state and its sources of revenues (with a massacre in Luxor), some army units supported the police and secured some areas in Upper Egypt. In Jordan, riots in Kerak in 1996 or Maan in 1998 were dealt with through military deployments. But these instances of military interventions acted more as exceptions rather than general rules. As a general rule, a fine but essential line has been drawn between the military as integrated in the political regime (with some officers playing crucial roles in the corridors of power), and the military as an integral institution of the state (with the military as a corps keeping some distance from day-to-day politics, especially in conducting repression, a defining feature of authoritarianism). Besides its proclaimed role in external defence, the army has thus positioned itself as a symbol of the state, carefully cultivating the image of an actor at the service of the country (in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, and in some sense also Saudi Arabia), while generally abstaining from

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[1] For a background see Philippe Droz-Vincent, "From Formal Wars to Maintaining Civil Peace?", roundtable "Rethinking the Study of Middle Eastern Militaries", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (August 2011), forthcoming.
[2] Neil Cooper, "The Demilitarization of the Egyptian Cabinet", in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (May 1982), p. 203-225.

the dirty task of policing society. As a result, armies have retained some legitimacy without threatening regimes and have been far less delegitimized than other state institutions (e.g., Interior ministries). Hence, the recurring slogan in the 2011 demonstrations across the Arab world: "the people and the army are one", namely a call by protesters addressed to the army to side with them against the hated police and paramilitary forces.

Against this backdrop, two elements are instrumental to understand the role of armies in authoritarian settings. First, the control that regimes have exerted over armies as a way to push them toward political "quietism"; and second, and in some cases, as a complementary effort, the engineering regimes have conducted within armies.

1.1. Taming/controlling the "beast"

Though closely monitoring promotions, maintaining rapid rotations in high command positions and generally keeping an eye on the military, regimes have displayed strategies to tame their respective militaries. They have taken care of the corporate requirements of their militaries (through large budgets, modernization programmes, freedom from external oversight), as well as the private interests of officers.[3] The military has been a relatively privileged actor within the public sector. In Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, social welfare for military personnel and their families have been maintained and even enhanced. Officers in general have lived in privileged social groups, secluded from civilians, in exclusive suburbs or residential areas; they have benefited from corporate privileges, such as access to military-only facilities (schools, hospitals, clubs, leisure facilities, military shops, etc.), cheap housing, transportation facilities, easy access to low-interest credits, access to scarce consumer goods at cheap prices, better medical care, etc. Some generals have also gained favourable economic positions by being involved in economic ventures: in Egypt, the military has invested in large and profitable economic ventures or in Sinai and coastal lands reclaimed and turned into tourist resorts; in Syria, until 2005, officers deployed in Lebanon benefited from the administration of smuggling networks.

Since the 1990s however, resources have grown thinner even for the military, as the region has experienced growing economic hardships and relative economic reform with growing pressures to liberalize. Hence, the importance for Egypt and Jordan of US military aid to compensate for declining state budgets. By contrast, after the end of the profitable alliance with the Soviet Union, the Syrian army has remained undercapitalized and poor, albeit still in a relatively privileged position vis-à-vis other sectors of society. The military has been engaged in numerous economic activities that have served to lessen circumvent fiscal constraints and offer off-budget resources. Military economies have thus expanded in the 1990s. For-profit enterprises controlled by the military are indicative of the army playing by the rules of the game in the Egyptian system and navigating through the Egyptian economic maze better than civilian entrepreneurs with less support (*wasta*) from the regime (but like other "crony capitalists" linked to the presidency).

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[3] Philippe Droz-Vincent, "From Political to Economic Actors: The Changing Role of Middle Eastern Armies" in Oliver Schlumberger (ed.), *Debating Arab Authoritarianism. Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007, p. 195-211.

All in all, the army has been a closed, "quietist", and secretive sector, close to regimes but kept at a distance from them through economic benefits. Generally, huge military establishments have been a characteristic of the Arab world. Militaries have displayed complex bureaucratic structures adverse to change - including, therefore, to military coups -, with aspirations to modernization and investment in new military technologies provided for by the state. Both these elements have combined to create a "quietist" military institutionalized within the regimes. In some cases, the small size of the military was a guarantee against military coups. The tiny Tunisian military, with a very low budget compared with other countries in the region, did play a role in repressing protests in the late 1970s and mid-1980s, but it was then relegated to external defence and Ben Ali's regime relied heavily on the police, the *sûreté générale*, and the national guard which fell under the purview of the Interior Ministry. In the Gulf monarchies, armies have been systematically "underdeveloped", that is, undersized in comparison to the scale of potential threats, both because strong armies have been viewed as a threat and because, in an emergency, regimes could rely on the US, whose 5th fleet is headquartered in Bahrain. In the small Gulf *shaykhdoms*, security has also been outsourced to foreign (e.g., Pakistani or Jordanian) units, embedded in the national military according to planned rotations.

1.2. Transforming the army and curbing potential challengers

Some Arab regimes have gone beyond taming armies, penetrating their militaries far more thoroughly and intimately. The Yemeni army has been characterized by the deep penetration of tribal relations and the rise of senior commanders from the north (with "adequate" tribal affiliations) after the 1994 reunification war; in Syria the Alawi community has benefited from preferential recruitment into top military posts; in Libya the army has been permeated by family and tribal networks; in Bahrain by a Sunni bias; in Jordan by a bias toward Transjordanian families (whole villages in the south rely exclusively on earnings of members within the security forces); and in Saudi Arabia by familial allegiances. In Syria, for instance, Alawites close to the Asad regime (to be distinguished from the Alawi community as a whole) have staffed the high ranks of the army: Hafez al-Asad was credited with the unwritten rule that every combat unit would be under the command of an Alawi officer (although there were many Sunni officers, especially hailing from rural areas). The late Syrian president even knew personally many high officers, related to him by blood or bonds of allegiance, and posted them to strategic positions in the army. Indeed he prepared the succession of his son Bashar in the second half of the 1990s by foisting him gradually into the high officers' corps and by reshuffling the officers' corps accordingly with the promotion of young officers (and the lowering of the retirement age).

Furthermore, regimes have built dual militaries with parallel units (the National Guard in Saudi Arabia) or praetorian forces (Syria, Yemen) staffed with those groups and commanders considered as most loyal to and vested in the regime. These units have constituted sizeable forces and have enjoyed a disproportionate share of quality equipment, budget and skilled manpower. Regular battle units have been located outside major cities (see for example the location of the huge Saudi military bases in the peninsula, very far from Riyad or the two holy cities), whereas praetorian forces have been stationed in big cities (Special Forces in Syria) or in strategic places (the

Saudi National Guard and oil wells). And the military intelligence apparatus has been inflated, in order to gather information also in the armed forces. Multiple intelligence entities have tracked opposition and cross-monitored each other, an effective safeguard against the growth of opposition within the security apparatus.

A limit case, bordering on the complete destruction of the army, has been Libya, where Colonel Gaddafi has strongly distrusted the army after his takeover in 1969 and has systematically weakened the military (the same holds true for the whole state apparatus). The regular military as an institution has been counterbalanced with the upgrading of special units and militias (within and outside the army) - that have been better equipped and trained than the regular army - falling under the direct control of Gaddafi's sons, members of the Gadhafa tribe or close allies. There has thus been a kind of "primordialization" of the security apparatus, with the infusion of tribal networks in the army. No surprise then that with social mobilizations mounting against authoritarianism in February 2011 in the northeast (Benghazi) and south of Tripoli, the regular Libyan army imploded.

2. Regimes facing mass mobilizations in 2011 and the moment of truth for armies: to shoot or not to shoot

The key feature of the social mobilizations against authoritarianism in the Arab world in 2011 has been its massive, non-sectorial, non-ideological, and peaceful character, lacking an organized leadership (though some young technology-savvy middle-class protesters have been prepared to seize the window of political opportunity). During their long tenure in power, authoritarian regimes have faced numerous waves of contestations, but these were geographically, sectorially and temporally scattered. Scattered mobilizations were contained by regimes through harsh repression and minimal concessions. Authoritarian regime also defeated armed uprisings led by Islamists in the 1980s and 1990s. In 2011 regimes have been at a loss when facing mass civil mobilizations that have not simply expressed discontent and called for dignity on Facebook pages, but have competed for the control of public spaces.

Violent conflict has pitted mass mobilizations against security forces.[4] Protesters outnumbered police forces that gave up the fight and let them occupy symbolic spaces (e.g., Tahrir square in Cairo, square of Change in Sanaa, Pearl square in Manama). While protesters engaged in civil resistance ("*selmiyya, selmiyya*", "peaceful, peaceful" were often heard slogans during demonstrations), regimes unleashed the full range of power of their security forces (tear gas, rubber bullets, live ammunitions at short range, and snipers posted on high buildings to create terror). Yet, as exemplified by the Tunisian and Egyptian cases, quantity should not be confused with quality - in Egypt, riot policemen recruited among poor and often illiterate young men engaged in their mandatory military service gave up the fight when confronted with astute and determined demonstrators. The significant strength of the police in terms of manpower and equipment did not translate into impact on the ground when faced with determined mass demonstrations. And violence, as well as the images of deaths or badly wounded

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[4] Mona el-Ghobashy, "The Praxis of the Egyptian Revolution", in *Middle East Report*, Vol. 41, No. 258 = 1 (Spring 2011), p. 2-13, http://www.merip.org/mer/mer258/praxis-egyptian-revolution.

unarmed citizens taken with mobile phones and posted on the Internet, hardened the determination of protesters. With the failure of the security forces, the regime called upon the military to enter the scene, exerting its full panoply of repressive methods and lethal might. The relationship between armies and their respective regimes has been critical in determining the former's reaction at this defining moment, when called upon by regimes to suppress popular protests.

In Tunisia, the tiny military corps was remote from politics. When facing the prospect of being engulfed in repression in January 2011, the chief of staff, General Ammar, is reported to have refused orders to open lethal fire at protesters, thereby opening the way to the ousting of Ben Ali. The army was then deployed to maintain order on the streets. This required fighting against the presidential guard and members of the police who had turned into snipers shooting at demonstrations.

In Egypt, the army was closer to the regime. In February 2011, when police and paramilitary security forces vanished from Egypt's main cities, soldiers and tanks were deployed. When tanks entered Cairo, the military became the *de facto* ruler. Army units on the streets seemed to have been under clear orders to sympathize with the demonstrators. They were welcomed as heroes on the streets. Yet, the military leadership also seemed to want to give the president every opportunity before asking him to step down. The military thus leaned toward the incumbent regime, as long as it could avoid being driven into repression.[5] But with protesters threatening to flock to the presidential palace, the army ultimately decided to side with the protest movement. Before the so-called "million man march" on 1 February, the military blessed the protesters' "legitimate demands" (to quote the military's spokesman, General Ismael Etman, on state television on 31 January 31) and declared that it would not use force against the people. Mubarak's regime had come to an end.

In other cases, the army is much more distant from society and/or more integrated in the regime. Where relations between regimes and armies are characterized by duality (Libya), bias (Bahrain), or praetorianism (Syria, Yemen), the army has been more willing to maintain internal order on behalf of incumbent regimes. In Bahrain, the clue to understand the army's reaction is its social/confessional composition with a Sunni bias.[6] In March 2001, the Bahraini security apparatus was backed up by one thousand "lightly armed" Saudi troops and an unspecified number of troops from the United Arab Emirates. However, even where the regime has engaged in a close engineering of its army, it has preferred to deploy praetorian units and use the regular army only as a support device. This has been evident in Syria, where special forces or armoured army divisions directed by the president's brother Maher al-Asad appear to be at the forefront of the repression. Likewise, the numerous forces led directly by members of President Saleh's immediate family have been active in the repression in Yemen. Yet even in these cases, armies have displayed extreme discomfort in repressing unarmed

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[5] As exemplified by numerous leaks in newspapers after events took place (*Al Shourouk*, April 18, 19 and 20, 2011), when the regime sent the plain-clothed police and armed gangs against the protesters in Tahrir Square, the military stood by at first and did nothing despite the protesters pleading the military to protect them.

[6] The Bahrain Defence Force and the Interior Ministry forces are also staffed with a number of foreigners (Arabs as well as Pakistanis), all of whom are Sunnis, another way to tip the sectarian balance in a country where 70% of the population is said to be Shiite.

civilians and have risked fragmentation. Syria in 2011 is no longer Syria in 1982, when the regime crushed the Hama uprising without much international concern. Not only is there a key difference between crushing an armed uprising and repressing peaceful protesters. But also, since the early 1980s, regular soldiers and conscripts in the Syrian army have seen nothing but corruption and abuse of power by high officers linked to the regime. Also the Yemeni army has begun to fragment, with several top commanders declaring their support for the anti-Saleh protesters. In all cases, the decision to shoot and to take part in repression is problematic. And regimes are very wary of this.

3. The day after. Armies in transitional contexts: maintaining civil order or engaging in civil strife or wars

Setting aside cases where the security apparatus has remained resilient/coherent or where regimes have apparently bowed to protesters accepting preventive concessions, and concentrating on transitional cases, we see that armies are set to play a pivotal role, either by rebuilding regimes or by filling the political void that emerges during power struggles. There are three models of post-regime breakdown army postures: the tiny Tunisian military chooses to stay at the margins of the political system; the huge Egyptian military is propelled into politics; and the Libyan army implodes as the country descends into civil strife and war.

Tunisia is the exception. On 24 January 2011, General Ammar, in a rare and awkward public address, promised to uphold Tunisia's revolution and guarantee stability until elections are held. But the Tunisian army, despite the high public profile and popularity of its chief of staff, does not seem to harbour political ambitions. The Tunisian army has allowed state bureaucrats and jurists take the lead. The civilian interim government, and three civilian commissions (on reforms, on addressing abuses committed by the Ben Ali regime, and on corruption) are leading the transition.

In Egypt the situation is far more complex. The Egyptian army has been the only institution that has retained some coherence and legitimacy during and after the 18-day uprising, and has therefore acted as the midwife of transition. The Mubarak regime and its police apparatus has collapsed, leaving a political void.[7] Within each and every state institution (e.g., ministries, universities, unions, media, governorates, municipalities), the collapse of the top levels has opened the way to mini-revolutions against their respective "little Mubaraks", i.e., those who have loyally served the former regime. Hence, chaos is at its peak, and within this institutional quagmire, the army acts as a direct stabilizer.

Libya displays a third model. Due to its inherent weakness and fragmentation, the Libyan army imploded. When the "17 February revolt" began, as an attempt by mainly young Libyans to emulate the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, the army was confused and scattered. The state apparatus rapidly disintegrated and Gaddafi's geographic

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[7] As stated by the 25 January Revolution Youth Coalition spokesman Nasser Abdel Hamid (*Al Shourouk*, April 10, 2011), at a time when distrust was aired about the military's real intentions, "the military is the only institution left to us".

areas of control dwindled dramatically in the first two weeks of the uprising, with entire army units defecting and providing the "rebels" (of Benghazi) a nascent military force. The regime then regrouped the loyalists, began to reorganize cohesive units, and called in the "mercenaries".[8] Large-scale repression followed, and since late February 2011, Libya has been enmeshed in a state of civil war, coupled with a foreign military intervention.

In the Tunisian and Egyptian cases, armies have been propelled in the midst of transition processes. Their stance is different from that of the Latin American militaries in the 1980s, when the latter negotiated their return back to the barracks with some privileges and (temporary) forgiveness for their human rights abuses. In Tunisia and Egypt, the military, due to its relation with regimes based on quietism and allegiance, has been the only state actor that retained some coherence and legitimacy. Notwithstanding, military rule is not in the offing in the Arab world, including in Egypt. The ensuing problem at this critical juncture is how to rebuild regimes that have been shaken or overturned by the protest movements.

In Egypt, the country that may play the role of trendsetter in the region, there are two main forces at play. On the one hand, there is the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which is "temporarily administering the country for a period of six months, or until the People's Assembly, the Shura Council and the presidency are elected" (communiqué n°5 of the armed forces, February 11, 2011). The Council is made up of twenty members from the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces. The Supreme Council has displayed discomfort with holding power for too long, and is above all concerned with a return to stability and normalcy. The precise definition of what such a state would entail is, however, subject to debate and divisions within the top brass of the Supreme Council. The Supreme Council seems to want a return to the status quo ante without deep structural changes, even by coming to terms with powerful political forces such as the old generation of the Muslim Brotherhood[9] and the remnants of the NDP. Hence, the rapid transition based on rushed constitutional amendments approved by referendum in March 2011 that tinkered with the authoritarian 1971 Constitution, aimed at rapidly moving towards parliamentary and presidential elections. The military has carefully cultivated its image as a neutral force, with its paternalistic communiqués, its Facebook pages and its regular appearances on TV shows. But the army has remained an iron fist, even in the post-breakdown period. Hence, also the army's strong reactions to and condemnations of public criticism, including allegations of torture and use of force against protesters. On the other hand, there is the young protest movement of Tahrir square, which seeks to uproot completely the remnants of the Mubarak regime, without antagonizing openly the military. They want to build a genuinely democratic system, but this entails neutralizing the military without challenging it, or at least fending off possible military interferences in politics.

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[8] In Libya, there is a tradition of relying on adjunct forces recruited from war-torn regions. These forces were part of the so-called Libyan-sponsored Islamic Legion engaged in Chad in the 1980s. They then roamed across various regional conflicts (some were part of the *janjaweed* in Darfur). They have been recalled by Gaddafi to crush the rebellion in 2011.

[9] The younger generation of Muslim Brothers is closer to the young liberal activists and protesters.

There is a lot of hypocrisy between these two forces and the first signs of a souring of the military-civilian/liberal honeymoon are emerging. The Supreme Council has given-in to some of the pressure from the street, without understanding fully the extent of change called for in the country. Its legitimacy in power directly emanates from the revolutionary movement, but at the same time it strives to put a break onto the revolutionary fever of young liberals. The protest movement is calling for a radical reworking of political and security structures. Constitutional and legal amendments that pertain to presidential and legislative elections and the law on political parties, and the speeding up of investigations and prosecutions against Mubarak, his family, and close associates, fall short of fulfilling the demands of most liberal forces.[10] There is a collision possibly in the offing between young liberals and the military, though at the time of writing in July 2011, the two forces have been wary of antagonizing openly each other and breaking the magic of the widely popular slogan "*al-jaisch wa al-chaab ayad waheda*" (the military and the people are one hand).

Conclusion: Are Arab armies up to the challenge?

Societal dynamics are the essential drivers of political change in the Arab world in 2011. Yet one state actor, the military, retains a crucial role. When asked to engage in repression, it can implode (Libya) or risk fragmentation (Yemen and possibly in Syria). In Egypt and Tunisia instead, the military has been driven into politics as the only institutional actor that has retained some sense of coherence and credibility. But the Tunisian and Egyptian cases are very different. In the former, the military has left the civilian state bureaucracy to deal with the complex search for a new political order. In the latter, the Supreme Council has entrusted itself with forging a new regime. In Egypt, the military has had to take decisions under strong societal pressure, a task it is not well equipped to carry out. Indeed, the military was part and parcel of the former regime, characterized by a mix of unwavering loyalty, caution, and resistance to change: a far cry from the protesters' call for a radically redefined political order in the country.

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[10] For two months key members of the Mubarak regime, such as Zakazia Azmy (chief of the presidential staff), Safwat al-Sherif (former Shura Council speaker), Fathi Sorour (former People's Assembly speaker), remained unquestioned by courts.

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