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Torturers, Jailers, Spies Lead Egypt's 'New' Government

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Dissidents demanding the end of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's regime had better hope they don't end up under arrest. The first members of Mubarak's new cabinet — a face-lift so he can stay in power — are heavily involved in the apparatus of state repression, including a spymaster who worked with the U.S. to torture terrorist suspects.

New prime minister [Ahmed Shafik](#) is a long-time deputy of Mubarak with a reputation for toughness. (Title of a 2005 profile: "[With an Iron Fist](#).") The new interior minister was the top jailer. And the new vice president is the Middle East's most powerful intelligence chief. That looks less like the kind of government demanded by the protesters and more like a government designed to crack down on them.

Let's start with the new internal-security chief, Gen. Mahmoud Wagdy, the [former head of prisons](#). What happens in an Egyptian prison? The [U.S. State Department's annual human rights report](#) explains: "[P]rison cells were overcrowded, with a lack of medical care, proper hygiene, food, clean water and proper ventilation. Tuberculosis was widespread; abuse was common, especially of juveniles in adult facilities; and guards brutalized prisoners."

As interior minister, Wagdy will run the police forces responsible for keeping the regime in power. After a [brief disappearance over the weekend](#), when several cities saw riots break out amidst the protests, the police returned to the streets Sunday. That prompted many Egyptians to wonder if Mubarak pulled the police back to tell the country that the alternative to his regime is

chaos. Wegdy's ascension would place someone familiar with crackdowns at the helm of those forces.

The most striking appointment is the new vice president: Omar Suleiman, Egypt's top spy. Egypt's intelligence services are considered the most robust in the Arab world — and a crucial asset to the west. When the Clinton and Bush administrations sought to hold terror suspects in foreign countries — where the United States could turn a blind eye to how they were treated — Egypt was the “obvious choice,” according to Jane Mayer's 2008 book *The Dark Side*.

Torture against dissidents is widespread in Egypt, especially against the country's Islamic militants — several of which joined al-Qaeda, including its deputy leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Suleiman “negotiated directly with top [CIA] officials,” Meyer reports, to take control of captured terrorists. The first, an Egyptian named Talaat Fouad Qassem, was captured by the United States in 1995 in Croatia and simply “disappeared” after the Egyptians took custody of him. The then-U.S. ambassador to Egypt described Suleiman as “very bright, very realistic” about “the negative things that the Egyptians were engaged in, of torture and so on. But he was not squeamish.”

That lack of squeamishness has yet to characterize Mubarak's response to the protests. Mubarak wants to hold on to power, and so he's not yet engaged in a bloodletting. But dissidents are calling for a general strike and a million-strong protest march Tuesday to force Mubarak out. With his new security officials in place, Mubarak would be well-positioned to crack down.

A journalist in Alexandria, Sharif Kouddous of the “Democracy Now” radio program, reported Sunday that protesters chanted against Suleiman and Shafik, “[calling them collaborators with the U.S.](#)” So much for mollifying the reform movement with a new cabinet.