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Syria

Repression and defiance in Assad's Syria

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Yusef Khalil reports on the groundswell of protests that have swept across Syria and the savage crackdown of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

Braving a heavy security presence and roadblocks leading into cities and towns, tens of thousands of Syrians took to the streets across the country following prayers in both mosques and churches on "Great Friday" as Good Friday is known in Arabic in the latest popular challenge to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his regime.

But protesters were met once again with deadly violence in spite of the long-awaited lifting of the country's half-century-old Emergency Law the day before and a series of other reforms. More than 100 unarmed peaceful demonstrators were reportedly killed by the Assad government's security forces in the bloodiest crackdown yet.

As a follow-up, in the early hours of April 24, security forces burst into the homes of opposition activists [<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/m...>], arresting an unknown number. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a London-based group, dozens have been arrested.

The mass protests in Syria began in early March in the city of Daraa after police arrested and tortured teenagers and boys for writing anti-regime graffiti based on slogans from the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions.

At first, it appeared as if the protests would be contained. However, other cities and towns joined in, and the protests gathered support across ethnic and religious lines. A huge mobilization on Friday, April 15, rocked the regime after it thought it had regained the upper hand through a combination of repression and promises of reform.

The following week, in the capital city of Damascus, a massive security deployment started as early as Thursday in preparation for what has become a common feature of the Arab revolutions: the ever-growing mobilization after noon prayers on Friday.

On the day itself, any protest or even a beginning of a gathering was swiftly attacked with tear gas and live ammunition. Nevertheless, thousands of people were still able to come out in Damascus and the surrounding towns.

Demonstrations continued in the southern city of Daraa, the site of the arrest and torture of the teenage boys in March. Nearby villages of Houran also saw significant protests and a security crackdown most notably in Izraa, where at least 10 people were killed, including a 7-year-old child.

The city of Homs saw some of the angriest demonstrations in response to a regime assault with live ammunition last Tuesday against a peaceful sit-in at what is now called Freedom Square. Adding insult to injury, the Syrian government and official news agency justified the murders by characterizing the demonstrators as Salafists members of a fundamentalist current in Islam known for their intolerance towards more moderate Muslims, as well as non-Muslims.

According to some sources, citizens formed committees to defend their neighborhoods from attacks by regime forces, but that didn't prevent the killing of at least eight people. In an alarming development, eyewitnesses have reported seeing security forces posing as Salafists, sent out to tarnish the image of the protesters by carrying out looting and provoking state security forces.

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North of Homs, the women and children of ar-Rastan came out in solidarity with the nearby city of Talbiseh which has been under siege, without electricity, water, or communications for several days.

But not all protests were met with repression. In some areas, like the coastal cities of Tartous and Baniyas, people were able to march and demonstrate without interference from the regime. In Qamishli, around 6,000 marched together under the banner "Arabs, Assyrians and Kurds Against Corruption"â€"an important statement that captures the spirit of unity and solidarity that has characterized the struggle in Syria.

However, in a cycle that has now become familiar to many, security forces opened fire the next day killing at least a dozen people who were mourning Friday's victims.

The intensity of the crackdown last weekend [<http://www.forbes.com/feeds/ap/2011...>] â€"with 120 killed in two daysâ€"led to the first resignations from the Assad regime when two members of parliament from Daraa stepped down. "If I cannot protect the chests of my people from these treacherous strikes, then there is no meaning for me to stay in the People's Assembly," one of the members of parliament, Nasser Hariri, told Al Jazeera.

ASSAD AND his regime are attempting to survive the tide of revolt by carrying out terrible violence, while also promising to make changes.

The most anticipated reform came April 21, with the lifting of the Emergency Law, which grants the government temporary powers during a "state of emergency." This "temporary" law has been in effect for the last five decades. It gives the state far-reaching powers to detain citizens, ban demonstrations, control the media, eavesdrop on private communications and interrogate people.

But the regime's move is highly conditional. First of all, though the State of Emergency has been lifted, the Emergency Law is still on the books and can always be activated again.

And in its place, a new permanent law went into effect that severely restricts demonstrations. Although formally recognizing the right to protest, the new law requires demonstrators to apply for permission from the Interior Ministry at least five days in advance. The ministry then has the power to deny the request, or change the date, time, location, duration and course of the demonstration.

Further articles in the new law seem to imply that any demonstration or gatheringâ€"even if it is peacefulâ€"that is not pre-approved by the authorities may be considered a "riot." In an ominous sign, the first applicant for a license to demonstrate was detained for several hours.

In anticipation of the Friday protests, the Syrian Local Coordination Committee, a network of groups organizing the protests, issued its first statement to clarify the demands it has united around.

The committee called for an end to the killings, torture, arrest and violence against peaceful demonstrators, as well as the release of all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience from Syria's jails. It also demanded constitutional changes that would limit presidential terms, increase the power of parliament and repeal Article 8 of the constitution, which recognizes the Baath Party as the one and only ruling party in Syria.

Judged by these demandsâ€"which are far from radical on their face, though they are profoundly so in the context of a 50-year-old dictatorshipâ€"the regime has shown itself incapable of any meaningful reform, and very capable of killing its own citizens. The non-concessions offered so far by the government are adding fuel to the fire of the

pro-democracy movement.

The regime's arrogance has led to an escalation in the demands of the protesters, which started with appeals for small-scale reforms and more freedoms. There is a shift in consciousness underway in Syria towards revolutionary conclusions. It has yet to reach the tipping point achieved by Tunisians and Egyptians, but the trajectory is unmistakable. In city after city, in town after town, the protesters are calling for the downfall of the regime.

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