

Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime's Slow-motion Suicide

Internati

onal Crisis Group

13 July 2011

(...) Desperate to survive at all costs, Syria's regime appears to be digging its grave. It did not have to be so. The protest movement is strong and getting stronger but yet to reach critical mass. Unlike toppled Arab leaders, President Bashar Assad enjoyed some genuine popularity. Many Syrians dread chaos and their nation's fragmentation. But whatever opportunity the regime once possessed is being jeopardised by its actions. Brutal repression has overshadowed belated, half-hearted reform suggestions; Bashar has squandered credibility; his regime has lost much of the legitimacy derived from its foreign policy. The international community, largely from fear of the alternative to the status quo, waits and watches, eschewing for now direct involvement. That is the right policy, as there is little to gain and much to lose from a more interventionist approach, but not necessarily for the right reasons. The Syrian people have proved remarkably resistant to sectarian or divisive tendencies, defying regime prophecies of confessional strife and Islamisation. That does not guarantee a stable, democratic future. But is a good start that deserves recognition and support. (...)

(...) The violence that has ensued is clouded in some mystery. Crude propaganda from the regime and its policy of banning outside reporters has ensured this. Protesters claim they are entirely peaceful, but that assertion is hard to reconcile with witness testimony and with the vicious murder of several security officers. More plausibly, criminal networks, some armed Islamist groups, elements supported from outside and some demonstrators acting in self defence have taken up arms. But that is a marginal piece of the story. The vast majority of casualties have been peaceful protesters, and the vast majority of the violence has been perpetrated by the security services.

The regime had a purpose. By sowing fear of instability, it sought to check the extent of popular mobilisation and deter the regime's less committed detractors. But while it appears to have had the desired impact on some Syrians, the balance sheet has been overwhelmingly negative from the authorities' standpoint. The security services' brutal and often erratic performance has created more problems than it has solved, as violence almost certainly has been the primary reason behind the protest movement's growth and radicalisation.

As the crisis deepened, the regime gradually recognised the necessity of reform. Playing catch-up with protester demands, it always lagged one if not several steps behind, proposing measures that might have had some resonance if suggested earlier but fell on deaf ears by the time they were unveiled. (...)

(...) The result has been an apparent stalemate. Protesters gain ground but have yet to cross the crucial threshold that requires enlisting the capital. The regime scores some points by rallying its supporters, but the crisis of confidence with much of the population and loss of legitimacy is almost surely too deep to be overcome. But it would be wrong to bet on the status quo enduring indefinitely. Economic conditions are worsening; should they reach breaking point – a not unimaginable scenario by any means – the regime could well collapse. Predominantly Allawite security forces are overworked, underpaid and increasingly worried. Should they conclude that they ought to protect what still can be salvaged – their own villages – rather than try to defend what increasingly looks doomed – the existing power structure – their defection also would precipitate the end of the regime.

Under the circumstances, is there anything the international community can usefully do? Many commentators in the U.S. and Europe in particular believe so and are clamouring for a more muscular response. In truth, options are limited. Military intervention is highly unlikely; it also would be unquestionably disastrous. It could unleash the very sectarian civil war the international community wishes to avoid, provoke further instability in an already unstable neighbourhood and be a gift to a regime that repeatedly has depicted the uprising as the work of foreign conspirators. Sanctions against regime officials can be of use, though this instrument almost has been exhausted; going further and targeting economic sectors that would hurt ordinary Syrians would backfire and risk a repeat of the unfortunate Iraqi precedent of the 1990s.

International condemnation is valuable insofar as it keeps the spotlight on – and potentially deters – human rights violations. In this respect the visits by Western ambassadors to Hama, where the prospect of major violence threatens, were welcome. But there are limits to what such steps can accomplish. To do what some are calling for (denounce the regime as illegitimate, insist that Bashar step down) are feel-good options that would change little. Ultimately, what matters is the judgment of the Syrian people; while many clearly wish to topple the regime, others have yet to reach that conclusion. A premature determination by the international community potentially could be viewed by those Syrians as undue interference in their affairs.

The world's cautious attitude has been a source of deep frustration and even anger for the protesters. That is entirely understandable, yet such caution might well be a blessing in disguise. The regime is unlikely to respond to international pressures, regardless of their provenance. Ultimately, the burden lies with the protesters to counter the regime's divisive tactics, reassure fellow citizens – and in particular members of minority groups – who remain worried about a successor regime, and build a political platform capable of rallying broad public support. Already their ability to transcend sectarian divides has confounded many observers. More importantly, it has given the lie to a regime that has made a business out of preying on fears of a chaotic or Islamist alternative to its own brutal reign. (...)

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