



Unrest in Syria No end in sight

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AS DARKNESS fell over Damascus on Friday night, the death toll was still soaring. In the bloodiest day of protests in Syria yet, security forces killed at least 72 people, probably more. Human-rights groups say they have 90 names of people, including several children, shot dead. At least nine more were killed at funerals on Saturday in what witnesses said was a bout indiscriminate and unprovoked shooting.



Friday's violence and protests marked a watershed for protesters and the regime of embattled president Bashar Assad. On Thursday he made the biggest reforms yet. He lifted the decades-old emergency law, abolished the state security court and brought in a law allowing peaceful protests. At the same time, security has been tightened and army checkpoints set up on roads to Damascus in an effort to quell unrest.

Thousands took to the streets in cities and villages across the country nonetheless. Protests broke out across the suburbs of Damascus, including in Sayyida Zeinab, a mainly Shia area. In response, the regime sent out its security forces and military police, the *shabiha*, a thuggish Alawite gang, and pro-government bruisers. Twenty-two died in Homs, Syria's third largest city. At least 20 were shot dead in Ezraa, a small southern town home to Syria's oldest active churches.

Protesters now want more than the sorts of reforms Mr Assad has announced; calls for the end of the regime are getting louder. Mr Assad's opponents are a disparate bunch; there is no real national opposition and the demonstrators have no clear leaders. But that may be changing. A group of local committees have popped up across the country; they issued a joint list of demands yesterday calling for an end to the killing and the start of a transition to democracy.

A nasty stalemate now reigns. After this week's concessions, Mr Assad can offer little more in the way of reform without demolishing his authoritarian regime. He cannot dismantle the 15 or so branches of security apparatus or cleanse the regime's upper echelons of corruption, both demands of his opponents. Today two members of Mr Assad's rubber-stamp parliament—which has little power and is made up of regime loyalists—resigned in outrage at the bloodshed. Both Naser al-Hariri and Khilil Refai come from Deraa, scene of much of the recent violence. Still, the rest of Mr Assad's supporters within the regime are likely to stick with him.

Adding insult to increasing injury, state media have blamed the protests on a farcically diverse list of culprits, from Palestinian extremists to Lebanese politicians, exiled opposition to armed gangs and, last week, Salafists. Yesterday they lambasted Al-Jazeera for showing what they

said were faked videos and false eyewitnesses.

Anxiety is rising in central Damascus, thus far mainly insulated from the unrest. What would usually be a weekend of Easter festivities has been replaced by fear and anger. None can ignore a country now littered with smashed cars and army sandbags. There is increasing polarisation. As protesters vow to push on, others who claim to represent a silent majority, are becoming increasingly angry at the threat to the country's stability.

Syria's protesters, newly emboldened, swing between elation at their success and despair at the bloodshed. A cycle of funerals, protests and deaths continues, and grows ever more violent. A solution is becoming more urgent, and more elusive.

(Photo credit: AFP)

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