

# Syria: Assad's regime uses brutal terror to suppress opposition

## Urgent need to build independent working class movement

Robert Bechert

The Assad regime's increasing brutal crackdown on opposition in Syria is following in the footsteps of Libya's Gaddafi and the Bahraini regime as they all attempt to stem the tide of revolution in North Africa and the Middle East.

It seems that the Syrian regime is attempting to use the army to crush the current centre of revolt, Deraa, a southern city of less than 80,000. Given the regime's history it is possible that it will employ the same brutality it unleashed in Hama in 1982, with up to 20,000 killed, when a Muslim Brotherhood inspired uprising was crushed.

In this way the Assad clique hopes to intimidate the rest of the country but, unlike in 1982, now the mood of revolt is far more widespread. Even if the regime suppresses the current protests, that will not guarantee the elite's continued rule.

However, unlike in Tunisia and Egypt in January and February, the mass protests in Syria have not, so far, significantly developed in either Damascus, the capital where over 10% of Syria's 22 million people live, or Aleppo, the largest city of about 2.5 million. In this regard there are some similarities with Libya where the largest mass protests this February and March did not initially take place in its biggest city, the capital Tripoli. It seems that the Syrian regime, like that of Gaddafi, still has some basis of support or, more likely, is sustained by a fear of what would follow its downfall.

### Regime

In Syria the ruling Assad family come from the minority Alawites and relies upon Alawite-dominated units of the security services to fight the protests. The president's younger brother commands the army's Fourth Armoured Division while a brother-in-law is an intelligence chief.

This has produced a potentially explosive situation in a country with significant national and religious minorities. About 80% of Syria's population are Arabs alongside large minorities of Kurds, Turkmen, Assyrians, Armenians and others.

On top of these ethnic groupings there are also religious divides with about three-quarters being Sunni Muslim, 16% being other Muslim denominations (including Alawite and Druze) and 10% Christian. While a majority of Syrians, 56%, live in urban areas a significant minority still live in rural areas where

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national and religious differences can play a big role.

The regime has frequently sought to gain support by balancing between the different national and religious groups. Many Christian leaders are seen as being close to the Assad regime and are fearful of its overthrow, particularly if an Islamist movement came to power.

In the midst of the current repression Bishop Philoxenos Mattias, a spokesman for the Syriac Orthodox Church, used his Easter address to praise Assad for the "safety and security he was bringing to Syria".

Meanwhile the major imperialist countries are caught in a dilemma. They are desperate to put a firewall around the revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East to prevent more 'friendly' regimes being overthrown.

One of their reasons for the intervention in Libya is to stop insurrectionary movements from below in other countries while also trying to seize advantage of the Libyan situation to install a more reliable ally in power there. To a certain extent they are debating whether to pursue a similar strategy in Syria, but Syria is not the same as Libya.

While Libya has far more significant oil reserves than Syria, it is not in a strategic geo-political position. Syria, on the other hand, is in a pivotal position in the Middle East, bordering onto key countries like Israel, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq.

As well as being fearful of what type of regime could come to power in Syria, imperialism also fears the possibility of the country's break up and the destabilising consequences that would have regionally.

These fears were summed up by Thomas Friedman recently in the New York Times: "In the Arab world, almost all these countries are Yugoslavia-like assemblages of ethnic, religious and tribal groups put together by colonial powers — except Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, which have big homogeneous majorities. So when you take the lid off these countries, you potentially unleash not civil society but civil war" (12 April, 2011). Significantly Friedman ended this article with the words, "Prepare for Yugoslavias", in other words ethnic and religious wars.

Of course, as a pro-capitalist commentator it does not even enter Friedman's head that there is a force, other than brutal dictatorships, that can prevent ethnic or religious conflicts, let alone offer a way out of

the current crisis. While supporters of capitalism see no alternative to their system, the working class has the potential to mobilise and unite in struggle the mass of the population in fighting against repression and for democratic rights and a better future.

Already this year, the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt offered a glimpse of this alternative force, the working class, in action. The signs that the working class was moving collectively into revolutionary action provoked the Tunisian and Egyptian elites to sacrifice Ben Ali and Mubarak respectively in an attempt to hold onto power.

### Programme

The urgent need in Syria is for the working masses and youth to establish their own independent forces and organisations. Neighbourhood committees and councils in the factories should be immediately organised in order to give a voice and organisation to the masses while defending the revolution.

A clear call for the formation of democratically-elected and run committees in all workplaces, communities and amongst the military rank and file, would get a wide response. However events in Syria, like those in Libya, are showing the limitations of purely spontaneous movements. With no independent workers' party to help give a strategy and direction to the uprising, there is the danger that the regime will be able to retain power.

To undermine the Assad clique and to ensure that they are not replaced by another group of gangsters an organised movement is necessary. Such a movement should offer a clear programme of action ie an end to repression by a corrupt elite, an end to mass unemployment and domination by imperialism.

Genuine mass bodies could offer an alternative and show that a revolutionary overthrow of the Assad regime would not, if it was led by the working class, lead to imperialism tightening its grip on Syria.

Democratic structures built from below could coordinate removal of the old regime, and maintain order and supplies and, most importantly, be the basis for a government of workers and poor. Representatives of such a government would prevent reaction, defend democratic rights and start to meet the economic and social needs of the mass of Syrians.

Without such a movement there is the danger that the Assad regime may be able to, at least temporarily, retain its grip on power.

### Role of imperialism

Some may look to the United Nations or other outside powers to act against the regime. This, however, would be a serious mistake. As in Libya, any intervention by the UN, Nato or the world's powers would aim at stifling real revolutionary change and ensuring a pro-western regime.

The big imperialist powers' actions, or inactions, over the past few months should serve as a warning to anyone thinking of supporting their intervention. They have done nothing about the situation in their close ally Bahrain where, proportionally, the numbers of protesters killed were similar to those slain in the first weeks in Syria.

In Egypt they only dumped Mubarak when they had to. Less than three weeks before Mubarak fell US secretary of state Hilary Clinton praised his rule: "Our assessment is that the Egyptian government is stable and is looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people".

A combination of self-organisation and appeals to the rest of the Syrian population, especially the armed forces' rank and file, is the only basis upon which the Assad regime can be overthrown in the working peoples' interests.

To ensure a clean break with the regime, a government representing the mass of Syrians is urgently required. Such a government would guarantee immediate and free elections and take urgent measures to improve living standards.

Socialists call for a revolutionary democratic constituent assembly and for a majority workers' and rural workers' government. This is the only way to win long-lasting full democratic rights, including the right to assemble, to strike and to organise independent trade unions.

It is the only way to ensure a living minimum wage, guaranteed jobs and decent homes, education and health for all. The revolutionary movement needs to be extended across the region and developed with a socialist programme: for a genuinely democratic socialist Syria and a socialist confederation of the region, on an equal and voluntary basis!

### The Committee for a Workers' International

May Day greetings from the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI), the socialist international organisation to which the Socialist Party is affiliated. The CWI is organised in 45 countries and works to unite the working class and oppressed peoples against global capitalism and to fight for a socialist world. For more details including CWI publications write to: CWI, PO Box 3688, London E11 1YE. email [cwi@worldsoc.co.uk](mailto:cwi@worldsoc.co.uk)

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