

Syrian regime at tipping point

United working class-led movement needed for regime change

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Grenade attacks by Syrian army defectors on the ruling Baath party headquarters in Damascus and on an airforce intelligence centre mark a new phase in the Syrian uprising. They indicate the start of an armed fight back, after eight months of mainly unarmed anti-government demonstrations being met by severe brutality from the state's forces.

Arms are increasingly being smuggled into the country along its long, porous borders. Although defectors from the army are still small in number compared to the regime's military forces, there is a steady stream of them, loosely organising as the Free Syria Army.

Most of the bloodshed across the country is being perpetrated by the government's police and military forces against protesters who, inspired by the Arab Spring, desperately want an end to the repressive, authoritarian regime.

Estimates of the death toll vary, from the 3,500 figure of the United Nations to much higher assessments. One report suggested that over 5,000 civilians have been killed in the city of Homs alone, the country's third largest city.

Homs is now under constant military 'occupation', but despite the huge risks involved, the courageous anti-government demonstrations in its suburbs go on. Dangerously though for the opposition movement, the brutality and provocations of the state security forces have created elements of division in some areas of the country, particularly in Homs, between the different ethnic, religious and national sections of the population.

Media commentators internationally are now speculating on whether this means that a descent into a bloody sectarian-based conflict has begun.

However, although such a devastating scenario is possible if the Syrian masses do not take steps towards building their own democratic, non-sectarian organisations, the central character of the situation at present is one of large demonstrations in many areas against the ruling regime, drawing in workers and the poor from the various minority sections of society as well as from the majority Sunni population.

A united working class-led movement has the potential power to cut across division, by organising non-sectarian defence bodies at grassroots level and by adopt-

ing a programme that can achieve 'regime change' in the interests of the overwhelming majority of the people rather than those of the Syrian capitalist class and foreign imperialism.

Arab League

The regional and world powers fear the developing situation but also are lining up to benefit from it. The Arab League called for an end to the heavy repression in Syria and wanted to impose 500 'observers'. With this interference being rejected by the Syrian regime, the league voted for sanctions on Syria and suspended its membership of the league.

That these largely autocratic and feudal Arab heads of state are not acting out of concern for human rights is blatantly obvious considering their own record, not least the repression by the regime in Saudi Arabia and its military assistance in crushing protests in neighbouring Bahrain.

Their criticism of fellow 'Arab nationalist' president Assad in Syria stems partly from their desire to protect themselves from outrage in their own populations at the massacres in Syria and from the great sympathy for the mass uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt that removed dictators like themselves. But also they have their own geo-strategic interests, and differences with what, to them, is an 'awkward' regime with links with Iran. And they fear the tensions and conflicts that could spread across the Middle East if Assad doesn't make significant concessions or step down with an 'orderly' transfer of power.

Opposition

The European Union (EU) has imposed sanctions on Syrian leaders, an arms embargo and an oil import ban. Such measures, and those of the US, will inevitably have some effect on undermining Assad's regime. Tourism, which contributed about 12% of the country's income before the Arab Spring, has also been hit. Overall, unemployment is rising and poverty worsening.

How long can Assad hang on? The country's elite, dominated by the Alawite minority but includ-

image not available

ing the elites of other sections of society such as the majority Sunnis and minority Christians, is still supporting him at present, including the army and security chiefs.

They have a plentiful supply of arms from Russia. Also, they managed to assemble hundreds of thousands of 'supporters' for Assad's rule on a recent demonstration in Damascus, but many turning out would have felt forced to attend, to avoid retribution.

The Times reported that on 13 November, a 14-year old school student was shot dead when he led a mass refusal in his school to demonstrate in favour of the regime.

The workers' movement needs a socialist solution based on genuine workers' democracy and public ownership

Furthermore, the main opposition political umbrella organisations - the Syrian National Council (SNC) and the National Coordination Committee (NCC) - are much divided within themselves, including over foreign intervention, dialogue with the regime, and whether the uprising should be armed.

The movement is as yet without a programme that can unite working class and middle class people and provide them with an organised strategy of mass struggle and general strikes - encompassing the two largest cities Damascus and Aleppo as well as all other areas - to bring down Assad's rule.

The workers' movement also needs to pose a viable alternative, which to end poverty and division would need to be a socialist solution based on genuine workers' democracy and public ownership of the country's key resources.

The NCC is right to reject any 'help' from the world and regional powers, including Turkey. The imperialist interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya have shown how their real aims are prestige, influence, trade, and acquisition of businesses and natural resources.

Regarding the issue of arms,

the only way to reduce the level of bloodshed and move as fast as possible towards ending it completely, is through supporting the right to set up armed, democratically organised defence bodies in every community and workplace.

The tanks and missiles of the state cannot be resisted with bare hands without huge loss of life - so armed, non-sectarian defence is urgent.

Workers' experiences

The western powers have so far rejected any military intervention even of a limited nature, such as a 'no-fly zone' along border areas. It would be far more risky for them than it was in Libya. As well as Syria's much more complex Balkans-type patchwork of ethnicities, religions and nationalities, the country is in a pivotal position in the Middle East, so the regional repercussions are potentially much more serious.

But this caution doesn't stop them from meddling in other ways, with none of it aimed at aiding the struggle for democracy of the Syrian people. Rather they are preparing for when Assad falls, by discussing with self-appointed 'leaders' of the opposition movement, as British foreign secretary William Hague did in London on 21 November.

The Syrian working class has to rely on its own potential strength - which is immense - to chart the way forward. Despite his resolve to fight to the end, Assad may flee or be removed very suddenly, and then the need for the working class to determine the nature of a new government would be immediately posed.

Workers' experiences in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya bring home forcefully that there should be no trust placed in any former leaders of the removed regimes, the military generals, or any other pro-capitalist politicians.

Instead it is necessary to promote a socialist solution, as the only way to bring about full employment, an end to poverty and bloodshed, and full democratic rights for all sections of society.

The full version of this article is on www.socialistparty.org.uk

Egyptian masses fight for real change

Thousands of activists have fought running battles with security forces for control of Tahrir Square, Cairo. Many people have been killed and thousands injured. There have also been big protest demonstrations in Alexandria, Suez, Mansoura and other cities.

"The military promised that they would hand over power within six months," one protester said. "Now ten months have gone by and they still haven't done it. We feel deceived."

There is growing anger at the role of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which is trying to retain its grip on power. The council, led by Field Marshal Mohamed Tantawi, is supposedly charged with overseeing the country's transition to democracy after three decades of dictatorial rule under president Mubarak.

Elections are due on 28 November, but it is becoming clearer that the SCAF will do everything to hold onto power, whatever the human toll. Instead of repealing Egypt's hated emergency laws, the generals have extended it, while protecting their own privileges. An estimated 12,000 people have been brought to military tribunals over the last ten months.

Several opposition parties are reported to have stated they will not take part in the coming elections. Mohamed El Baradei, a pro-capitalist opposition figure, has offered himself to lead a 'national government of salvation'.

Like other revolutions, the Egyptian revolution is not a single act but a process. The masses fought hard to remove Mubarak last January/February at the cost of many lives. After he was overthrown, strikes broke out in many sectors and protests continued by youth, students and other sections of society.

For big swathes of the population, exhausted by struggle and yearning for 'stability', they put hopes in the new regime to oversee democratic elections and a better life. But now big sections of the population have correctly concluded that the SCAF is an attempt to continue the Mubarak regime in new clothes and that a new revolutionary upsurge is needed to win real and long-lasting democratic rights and fundamental social and economic changes.

This is why the CWI argued on 11 February, the day of Mubarak's removal, that the working class and youth should have, "No trust in the military chiefs!" and needed to build an independent movement that fights for "a government of the representatives of workers, small farmers and the poor!"

The movement needs to urgently create democratically elected and run committees of mass struggle and defence against state repression. The army rank and file can be won over, with a firm and decisive appeal to join the uprising.

Mass workers' action, including a general strike, to overthrow Field Marshal Mohamed Tantawi, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and the whole rotten, brutal regime needs to be organised. Alongside this, there needs to be a struggle for a government formed by representatives of workers, the youth, small farmers and the poor that can take immediate action against counter-revolution and for democratic rights, immediate steps to improve living standards, and to break with capitalism.

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see full article on www.socialistworld.net

The Committee for a Workers' International

The Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) is 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.

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