

121

JUNE  
2011

## SYRIA IS UNDERGOING A REVOLUTION BY SIEGE

**Emma Salma** Independent Journalist

**S**ince the bloodbath has significantly increased in Syria over the last few weeks, people keep asking themselves: is there any sign on the ground that the revolution may succeed?

The public opinion is divided in Syria. It is true that the number of people standing by the authorities is dropping from Friday to Friday, alienated by the regime's brutality and its increasing despotism, but popular support for the revolution has not yet reached the point at which those opposing change become reluctant to speak out. Posters and banners can still be seen in the shops and streets of those neighbourhoods and villages where the majority of the population supports the dictatorship, including the centres of both Damascus and Aleppo, the strongholds of the regime.

The oligarchy, the bureaucratic apparatus, the political and military elites and the new upper middle class (which has emerged over the last decade as a result of a market-based economic reform) are standing shoulder to shoulder with the regime, but so are most of the religious minorities, including Christians (who are terrified of the possibility of the rise of an Islamic regime), the Druze and the Alawites (the Shiite sect to which President Bashar Al Assad belongs). This one third of the population, accustomed to the protection of impunity, does not yet perceive the threat posed by the revolutionaries as a serious challenge to the way of life they have, until now, taken for granted.

Outside the two biggest Syrian cities, in Deraa, Duma, Homs, Baniyas, Hama and other, an increasing percentage of the population (including poor peasants, educated unemployed youth, intellectuals longing for freedom of expression and political opponents) is becoming aware of the prevailing oppression, corruption and misery the current rulers bring about, and they are, slowly but with increasing resolve, taking to the streets. And they are definitely paying a heavy price for their decision. Hundreds are now dead, and thousands are missing. Many of the streets have virtually been turned into a war zone; some cities have become ghost towns on the eve of the regular Friday protests. In Deraa, the epicentre of the revolt, tanks have replaced people; in Duma, a suburb of the capital, the main crossroads have been sandbagged for weeks; and Homs has been completely overrun by terror. The disheartened city of Hama,

immersed in a déjà vu feeling, is unable to forget the deaths of the thousands who perished in 1982 at the hands of Hafez al Assad, Bachar's father, when he brutally put an end to a violent Islamic insurrection that threatened to seize his power.

But one thing is certain: in the psyche of all those who have managed to overcome their fears and finally speak up, there is simply no going back to how the things were. They may disagree about what must come next and yes, they are aware of their territorial constraints, their lack of unified leadership, and their international isolation, but they have revealed a firm determination to continue pushing against the wall of tyranny, putting their lives in danger if necessary.

However, there is also another significant, perhaps decisive, portion of the population that must be brought into the picture: those who have never before questioned the regime –merchants, liberal professionals, entrepreneurs and the secular segments of society– who were upset by the cynicism and arrogance demonstrated by President Al Assad in his crucial speech to the Syrian Parliament on March 30. These groups have now taken a step back and are witnessing the unrolling of the events with increasing anger. In their minds, the movement to overthrow the regime has not yet become feasible, especially since there is no clear alternative on a horizon full of threats: sectarian strife, civil war, radical Islamism, foreign military intervention, war with Israel - a long list of legitimate fears exploited by the regime as a propaganda tool in order to close ranks around its cause.

But trust in the regime, once called into question, can no longer be taken for granted. The dictatorship is aware of this situation and is struggling to regain legitimacy by punishing scapegoats, repaying the harassed minorities (like the Kurds and the Hanbalis), giving out false promises for dialogue, reforms and amnesty and rushing in a series of populist measures – from reducing the duration of the compulsory military service to tax reduction on basic products. Al Assad is trying to regain confidence and keep social discontent outside the frame of the rebellion.

The battle for hearts and minds is a key one in Syria. There is good reason for the regime to prevent foreign media from properly covering events and for using local media as a propaganda tool. Information is chaotic and conflicting. But in the technological era, the authorities no longer have control over the flow of information and can no longer stem people-to-people communication or the spreading of rumours. Syria's government keeps embracing conspiracy theories, accusing unidentified armed groups of bringing death and chaos to the nation. Distrust is huge outside its hardcore group of supporters, even among those who have not witnessed the soldiers of the Fourth Division lounging around the corners of the deserted streets of Deraa, eating their zeit and zaatar sandwiches beneath walls painted with graffiti calling the army to join the revolution. Appearances, not facts, are the key to a successful revolution.

Many scholars may argue that the revolution cannot succeed while the army stands by the regime. One might agree that even though some reports of mutinies and defections in the ranks of the Syrian army are credible, with the tight control exercised by Bachar Al Assad and his family, it is impossible to imagine a scenario similar to that which occurred in Egypt or Tunisia, where the army as a whole abandoned the ruling power. Syria is undergoing a "revolution by siege", as opposed to "revolution by assault", to put it in the words of the late Ryszard Kapuściński (Shah of Shahs, 1992). While in the case of the revolution by assault, the success of the endeavour is decided by the first blow, in the case of the revolution by siege, the first strike delivered is usually weak and does not seem to forebode a cataclysm.

As the events gather speed, become more dramatic and more people join in, the walls surrounding the authority start to crack and then break. The struggle between the regime and the rebels, will certainly be fierce. Who knows how the attrition will affect the ranks of the opposing sides? Who knows what is happening in the inner corridors of the presidential palace? But one thing is certain: while the Al Assad regime may try anything ('will stop at nothing' maybe better) to avoid losing power, the truth is that fewer and fewer Syrians buy it anymore. And more significantly: they are courageously overcoming their fears in order to stand up and speak out, loud and clear, to whoever wants to listen.