

# Syrian president delays reforms, demands national unity against protests

Alex Lantier  
1 April 2011

President Bashar al-Assad spoke at the People's Assembly in Damascus Wednesday, ahead of protests scheduled for today, to appeal for national unity while making no further concessions to popular demands for political change. Syria has been ruled under emergency laws since 1963, the year a coup placed the Ba'athist party in power.

In his speech Wednesday, Assad put off the cancellation of the emergency law and discussion of broader political change in Syria. Yesterday the Syrian government announced the formation of a committee to examine the emergency law, which will produce a final report only on April 25, replacing the emergency law with "anti-terrorist legislation."

State forces have repeatedly fired on demonstrators after the outbreak of protests on March 18, centered on Daraa, in Sunni areas in the south near the border with Israel. The Assad regime has sought to backtrack in face of the protests, dissolving the cabinet on Tuesday and promising to increase salaries for state employees and consider legal reforms on March 24.

The army also intervened against protests in Latakia on March 27, amid reports that gunmen there had targeted both protestors and police, and Syrian claims of foreign involvement. Such claims cannot be dismissed out of hand, given the long-standing enmity of the United States, French, and Israeli governments for the Syrian regime.

Assad sought to strike a balance in his speech, presenting himself as a safe pair of hands in Syria to the imperialist powers, while using justifiable fears of foreign intervention in Syria to give a veneer of popular nationalist legitimacy to his right-wing regime.

He began by hypocritically praising the mass popular struggles in Arab countries that broke out this winter. Despite the implicit contradiction with his anti-

imperialist posture, he invoked the fear that the uprisings had produced in his ongoing meetings with unnamed foreign politicians and media figures.

He said, "They used to propose ideas which were contrary to our interests and which implied conspiring against the resistance and against other Arabs. When pressures intensified, I used to tell them that even if I accept this, the people will not. And if the people do not accept it, they will reject me. And if they do, that means political suicide for me. They used to smile, of course, implying that they did not believe me. Today, after these events, there have been several meetings, and I repeated the same words. Now they were shaking their heads in agreement."

Taken at face value, this implies that powerful imperialist interests consider the Assad regime as a potentially necessary ally in the face of a rapidly-moving radicalization of the Middle Eastern masses. Indeed, Assad then argued that imperviousness to popular sentiment was an essential feature of his regime.

Implausibly claiming that the recent wage increase and legal reforms had already been planned in 2005, Assad insisted that his government should not bow to popular opinion: "If there was no sedition, wouldn't we have done these reforms? If the answer is yes, it means that the state is opportunistic, and this is bad. If we say that these things were made under the pressure of a certain condition or popular pressure, this is weakness. And I believe that if the people get the government to bow under pressure, it will bow to foreign pressure."

Though he called the shooting of protestors by state forces "mistakes of the moment," he then dismissed it as the inevitable results of popular protest: "When things move to the street, and dialogue is conducted in

the street and outside institutions, things naturally become chaotic.”

Assad then argued that protests against his regime were manipulated by foreign interests. He said that foreign agitators backed by satellite TV and using SMS, and Internet campaigns are stoking sectarian violence in Syria.

There are substantial sectarian tensions in Syria, which has a Sunni Muslim majority, in addition to Alaawi, Druze, and Christian minorities. Assad’s associates, drawn from the Alaawi minority, monopolize much of Syria’s wealth. Elsewhere in his speech, Assad praised free-market reforms his regime has undertaken at the urging of “foreign officials,” adding that there was no opposition to these reforms from “people around me.”

Noting that the protests began in the southern Daraa governorate, he said, “Daraa is on the frontline with the Israeli enemy; and it is the first line of defense for the hinterland. Daraa, al-Qunaitira, and part of rural Damascus defend the other parts of Syria which lie behind them. No one can be in a position defending the homeland and at the same time conspiring against it. This is impossible and unacceptable.”

Israel has repeatedly fought wars with Syria, and still holds the Golan Heights, which it seized from Syria during the 1967 Middle East War.

Assad added, “I remind you of the ‘domino effect’ term which was used after the invasion of Iraq, when the United States assumed then under the former [Bush] administration that the Arab countries are domino blocks and the American projects will hit just one of these blocks and the others will fall.”

Foreign officials split in their reactions to Assad’s speech and to Syria’s broader policy.

Speaking to the *Los Angeles Times*, the Israeli Defense Ministry policy director, Major General Amos Gilad, said, “Officially it’s better to avoid any reaction and watch the situation.” The *Los Angeles Times* added, “Privately, Israeli officials confirmed that although Assad is no friend, he’s probably better than the immediate alternatives, which could include civil war, an Iraq-style insurgency, or an Islamist takeover by the Muslim Brotherhood.”

Previously, however, Israeli President Shimon Peres had provocatively said that protests could give Israel “better neighbors.”

US State Department spokesman Mark Toner said, “We feel the speech fell short with respect to the kinds of reform that the Syrian people demanded and what President Assad’s own advisers suggested was coming.” US Senators John McCain and Joseph Lieberman have both called on US President Barack Obama to explicitly support anti-Assad protests.

Alain Juppé, the foreign minister of France—the former colonial power in Syria—said the French government was “disappointed.” He called for Assad to make more concessions to protests: “It was a very general speech. I do not think it will really respond to the expectations and I would even say the anger of the Syrian people. We need today concrete propositions to respond to the aspirations of the people.... We energetically call on the Syrian authorities to move in this direction.”

When asked if France would consider bombing Syria, as it has bombed Libya under the guise of protecting protestors there, Juppé replied, “Each situation is specific.”

Attempts by the United States, France, Britain, and other powers to exploit protests in Libya to bomb Libya and organize a right-wing power grab by the Benghazi-based National Council have no doubt aided the government’s appeal to nationalism. Pro-Assad rallies gathered tens of thousands of demonstrators in Damascus and Aleppo Tuesday, in response to appeals by the government the previous day.

Significant anti-government protests are also expected today, the first day of prayers after Assad’s speech.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**