

Dozens killed in Syrian protests

The Bill Van Auken
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Dozens of protesters were killed in Syria Friday as security forces opened fire on demonstrations called one day after President Bashar al-Assad enacted partial concessions aimed at quelling the unrest.

The protests were among the largest and the bloodiest to take place in Syria since political unrest first gripped the country five weeks ago.

According to the Syrian Human Rights Information Link, based in Damascus, a total of 72 people lost their lives on Friday in the suppression of protests that erupted in at least 20 towns and cities across the country.

The bloodiest repression unfolded in the poorer suburbs of Damascus, where plainclothes police and security forces used live ammunition and teargas to break up demonstrations of thousands in Douma and Zamalka.

“Demonstrators were going with olive branches, it was peaceful,” Hazem, who participated in one of the protests outside Damascus, told Al Jazeera. But then, he said, the marchers were “surprised by live ammunition from some security forces in one of the flats on the street.”

Another person who joined a protest in Douma told the *New York Times* that police fired directly into the marchers. “People were calling for the fall of the government, the end of the Ba’ath Party and freedom,” he said. “I got scared and left.”

In the course of the protests, demonstrators ripped down posters of President al-Assad and toppled statues of his father and former president Hafez al-Assad.

According to the human rights groups, 37 people were shot dead in the Damascus suburbs.

Within Damascus itself, the blanketing of the city with security forces ensured that demonstrations were suppressed before they could begin. Checkpoints were set up across the Syrian capital, where people were asked for identification. The evident aim of these

measures was to prevent protesters from pouring into the city from the more impoverished suburbs.

Police used teargas to disperse a sizable crowd that assembled, chanting for the downfall of the regime, outside the al-Hassan mosque in the historic Damascus neighborhood of Midan, just outside the city center. Security forces were apparently also able to prevent any significant protests in Aleppo, Syria’s second-largest city in the northwest of the country.

Large numbers of security personnel and plainclothes police were also deployed in Homs in central western Syria, near the Lebanese border. The country’s third largest city, it had been a center of protests and repression over the past week. Al Jazeera quoted an unnamed witness as saying that police opened fire on a group of about 200 demonstrators who had moved out ahead of a crowd of some 3,000 protesters. “Suddenly, the security opened fire on us randomly,” he said.

Similar protests and repression were reported from the Mediterranean city of Baniyas to Dara’a in the south to the heavily Kurdish city of Qamishli in the north.

There was also a demonstration in the city of Hama, which was leveled by Syrian security forces 30 years ago in the ruthless crushing of an Islamist revolt.

The state-controlled Sana news agency denied reports of demonstrations in a number of cities, while reporting that two policemen were killed and 11 wounded in armed clashes in Damascus and Homs. It also reported an armed confrontation in Izraa, near Dara’a in the south in which eight people were said to have been killed and 29 wounded.

The Syrian government has blamed the demonstrations on foreign instigation—and increasingly on news coverage by foreign networks like Al Jazeera and the BBC—and on Islamist agitation.

Organizers of Friday’s demonstrations referred to the protests as “Great Friday,” calling attention to the Christian celebration of Good Friday and stressing

unity between Syria's disparate religious and ethnic populations. "Friday, one hand, one people, one heart, one goal," was one of the slogans advanced by those who called for the demonstrations. The evident aim was to counter the al-Assad government's warnings that the unrest in the country threatens to unleash the kind of sectarian bloodbath seen in Iraq in the wake of the US invasion's toppling of Saddam Hussein.

Just a day before the demonstrations, al-Assad had formally endorsed a set of partial concessions to the demands for an end to his authoritarian regime. He lifted an emergency law that has been in effect for 48 years and abolished the special National Security Court.

Also enacted was a new law allowing peaceful demonstrations, but requiring that organizers first secure a permit. According to the British *Guardian*, the first person to apply for such a permit, identified as Fadel al-Faisal from Hassakeh, was detained by police for several hours.

There was no possibility of securing permits for Friday's demonstrations, which were therefore deemed illegal.

Al-Assad replaced his prime minister and sacked unpopular governors in Homs and Dara'a and fired the security chief in the coastal town of Baniyas, three areas where some of the harshest repression has taken place. A few hundred political prisoners have also been released.

The government has pledged to implement a new law allowing opposition political parties, although it is unclear whether it would amend the Syrian constitution that proclaims the ruling Ba'ath party "the leading party in the society and the state."

In a televised speech, al-Assad said that the measures left no "excuse" for further demonstrations.

For those who took to the streets on Friday, however, these concessions amounted to too little, too late. The joint statement issued by local committees supporting the demonstrations called for the freeing of all political prisoners, who number in the thousands, the dismantling of the security apparatus and the abolition of the Ba'ath party's political monopoly.

One of the reasons that the supposed reforms failed to quell the street protests is that they did nothing to address the social and economic conditions confronting masses of Syrian workers and the poor.

While the official unemployment rate was reported as 8.3 percent last year, most analysts believe that the real figure is closer to 20 percent. A UN report on poverty in the country issued last September found that one out of every three Syrians live below the poverty line and between two and three million are living in extreme poverty. Meanwhile, cuts in fuel subsidies implemented by the government have unleashed broad-based price rises.

With a quarter of a million new jobseekers entering the labor market annually, unemployment is heavily concentrated among the young, where unemployment rates top 30 percent.

The implementation of so-called market reforms has only served to exacerbate social inequality, creating fortunes for a financial and business elite close to the al-Assad regime, while steadily eroding the real wages of Syrian workers.

Under these conditions, the corruption, repression and monopolization of political power that characterize the Ba'athist regime have become intolerable for broad sections of the population.

There are also sharp regional disparities, with the country's east and south, which have been centers of the anti-regime protests, facing drought, poor infrastructure and economic deprivation.

As yet, the demonstrations have not grown to the size of the mass protests that toppled Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt, and the security forces have been able to break them up.

For their part, the US government and the Western European powers, while issuing statements deploring the violence, have shown no inclination to demand al-Assad's ouster, much less intervene as in Libya. The consensus view within Western ruling circles appears to be that the overthrow of the Ba'athist government could destabilize the entire region, and that whatever conflicts they have with the al-Assad regime, it is preferable to maintain the status quo.



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