The Noose Tightens Around Al-Assad

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Thursday, 08 December 2011

The Arab league imposes sanction on Syria to force Bashir al-Assad, its defiant leader, to step down as president and to end the killings of protesters

The noose is gradually being tightened around the neck of Bashir al-Assad, Syrian president. The protests against his regime and the killings of protesters by his security forces have attracted the attention of the country’s Arab neighbours. On November 27, a meeting of the Arab League agreed on sanctions that would force Bashir al-Assad to end the killings of protesters and quit. The sanctions were approved by a meeting of foreign ministers of the League member nations held in Morocco. One major item on the list of sanctions to be imposed is an end to all transactions by the League’s member nations with Syria’s Central Bank. Some categories of Syrian government officials are also to be banned from travelling to any of the Arab States. Syrian assets in these countries are also to be frozen. Another meeting of the league was held in Doha, Qatar, to fine-tune the sanctions in such a way that it would not harm Syria’s neighbouring countries. The imposition of the sanctions is historic. It is the first time that the Arab League would introduce such stiff condition against a member. The Arab League finance ministers had earlier recommended that economic sanctions be levied against the Syrian government for its part in a bloody crackdown on civilian demonstrators. This recommendation was consequently acted upon by the foreign ministers. Syria attracted this deluge of sanctions because it failed to respond to the Friday, November 25, deadline given to it to allow Arab League observers into the Middle Eastern country to monitor the government’s response to civil unrest. “All the steps that we are carrying out are to avoid a foreign intervention in Syria. Will we succeed? We don’t know. We hope that eventually we will. That’s why we keep trying to solve the crisis within the Arab framework. We have responsibilities not only as Arabs but as human beings to stop the bloodshed in Syria,” Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, Qatari foreign minister, said. He said officials were directing the sanctions against Syrian’s government, not its people because such steps are necessary as long as Syrian government refused to allow Arab League observers into the country. “We are talking about a humanitarian crisis. It is not a political manoeuvre,” he said. The slate of sanctions proposed also included preventing any private or commercial airlines from the League’s 22 member states from flying into or out of Syria. But, this suggestion is yet to be ratified. This sanctions are a big blow to al-Assad. The sanctions are among the clearest signs yet that Syria is gradually drifting into international isolation. Al-Assad has long boasted of his country being a powerhouse of Arab nationalism, but now, his government has been abandoned by some of his closest allies and now his Arab neighbours. But Syria is not likely to bear the pains of the sanctions alone. The impact would be felt by another Arab countries’ economy momentally. The sanctions would further squeeze an ailing Arab economy that already is under sanctions by the US and the European Union. Of all the Arab nations, Lebanon and Iraq were the only countries that declined voting on sanction imposition on Syria. Dave Aworawo, doctor of international relations and diplomacy, said, Lebanon declined because its economy is dependent on Syria’s. But these sanctions do not seem to have changed the Syrian attitude. Walid al-Moallem, Syria’s foreign minister, said the sanctions were “a declaration of economic war.” A day after the League imposed the sanctions. Al-Moallem bemoaned the fact that the Arab League and others had refused to believe that there is a foreign conspiracy against Syria. Accolades for the action came from the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office. “We welcome the Arab League’s leadership in seeking an end to the horrific violence in Syria,” the office said in a statement. Since March, protesters in cities across the country have demanded al-Assad’s resignation and democratic reforms. The military crackdown has resulted in thousands of deaths. As the Arab League was debating the sanctions last Sunday, clashes erupted in Syria with at least 12 people killed. But, the State-run SANA, contradicted this report and instead, said that 25 army and security force members were buried. “The martyrs were killed in the line of duty by the armed terrorist groups. Some Arab nations are already taking actions to evacuate their nationals out of Syria. The instability in Syria has prompted Bahrain’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs to urge all its citizens in Syria to leave. The ministry also said citizens should avoid travelling to Syria for their own safety. However, Al-Assad’s government has consistently blamed armed gangs for the violence. But, the UN is not accepting his explanation. Ravina Shamdasani, a spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, estimated recently that more than 3,500 Syrians have died in government crackdown over the past eight months. This estimation is worsened by the release of a more damning UN report on November 28. A UN probe discovered that Syrian troops killed hundreds of children and committed other “crimes against humanity” since the government crackdown began in March. A panel of independent experts said at least 256 children were killed by government forces early in November, with some boys sexually tortured and a two-year-old girl shot to death just to prevent her from growing up to be a demonstrator. Susan Rice, US Ambassador to the UN, issued a statement praising the report for documenting Assad regime’s ruthless, depraved campaign against its own people. “Among the commission’s findings are evidence of systemic government support for the rape and torture of children. The world can now clearly see what boundaries the Assad regime is willing to cross to retain its grip on power.” Still, there is no word from al-Assad on the way forward for Syria. Road to a New Egypt Endurance Akoro About 50 million out of the 85 million Egyptians who are eligible to vote in this year’s parliamentary election turned out to vote, November 28. More than 50 political parties fielded more than 10,000 candidates in various elective positions. This is the first time Egypt will be conducting an election to democratically elect its leaders. Presidential election would be held in mid-2012 but with the new constitution which allows the military to have powers over parliament, Egyptians remain unsatisfied and have vowed to remain on the street until that is reversed. Voting started early Monday morning in Egypt with a large turn-out of

voters forming long queues in most polling stations. With the electorate very happy and expectant that this will mark a new beginning for their country. Voters in nine provinces, including Cairo, Port Said, Alexandria and Assiut are voting in the first stage of a process extending until March. Other provinces will take their turns through December and early January for elections to the 508-member People’s Assembly. Voting for the upper house, or Shura Assembly of parliament takes place after that and the presidential election is supposed to be held by mid-2012. Official results from the first phase of voting should be announced on Wednesday, but the final make-up of the lower and upper houses of parliament would not be clear until March. The quest for freedom has been keeping the protesters on the streets in a wave of demonstrations in order to experience genuine democracy. For more than three decades, Egypt had been under the leadership of Hosni Mubarak, the country’s president for 30 years, until he was forced out of office in February, following protests calling for his resignation. The protests lasted for more than two weeks. But shortly after Mubarak’s exit, the military government took over powers and subsequently produced a draft document, setting out principles for a new constitution under which the military and its budget would be exempted from civilian oversight. But this did not go down well with the civilians as they took to the street again for the second time in less than a year, calling for an end to the nine months old government, for failing to hand over power to a democratically elected parliament within six months of assumption into office as promised. They also rejected the drafted constitution because they fear that it would allow the military to retain immense powers after a new civilian government is elected. Peace Deal in Yemen Lucy Bassey Yemenis who have for long been pressing for a political change got a major break on November 23, with the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Mohammed Basindwa was immediately appointed to steer the machinery of state until early February when elections would be held for the troubled country. Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi was retained as the new vice-president. Saleh resigned after a deal that was brokered in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, which granted him immunity against prosecution and ends the over six months of deadly unrest in the country. The deal also offered amnesty to those who committed certain crimes during the crisis, but the amnesty does not cover those involved in the assassination attempt against Saleh in June which he was badly wounded. However, Hurriya Mashhud, an opposition leader, rejected the amnesty deal saying that it went against the agreement brokered by the Gulf Co-operation Council, GCC. Her position notwithstanding, the deal was signed last week. But she argued that Saleh no longer has the right, nor the prerogative to enjoy immunity against prosecution. Basindwa was nominated by the opposition as interim prime minister. He is a former member of Saleh’s governing General People’s Congress and had held several cabinet positions, including foreign and information port-folio. He left about 10 years ago to become an independent opposition figure. Basindwa now has two weeks to form a government consisting equally of opposition members and Saleh’s loyalists, according to the provisions of the GCC settlement. Hadi, the vice-president, announced that elections would be brought forward to February 21, 2012. Early elections would also be held within 90 days instead of 2013 as previously scheduled. Saleh, who ruled Yemen for 33 years, had to resign after intense pressure was mounted on his opposition parties in the country and the international community. His security forces cracked down violently on protesters against his rule which began in January. In an address to his governing party early this year, Saleh urged attacks and anti-government protests to stop. He also said attacks on military bases, roads and transmission towers should stop. Protests should also stop in to allow for peace. But the immunity provision of the accord has angered anti-Saleh protesters, who have continued to demonstrate, demanding that he should face trial for corruption and the deaths of protesters. In addition, Yemen faces Shia rebels in the north, separatists in the south and an active branch of the international al-Qaeda network called al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.