When Will It End? How Will It End?

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Sunday, 01 April 2012

A veto by two permanent members of the UN Security Council blocks foreign intervention to end the Syrian crisis, thus raising questions on the direction of the 11-month-old street protests

The Syrian uprising is now a long-drawn out battle. Even the intervention of global bodies such as the UN and the Arab League have not succeeded in ending the uprising and the bloody crackdown by the government on the demonstrators which has resulted in the death of thousands of people. The effort of the UN Security Council to force the exit of Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian president, from office through a resolution was futile as both Russia and China blocked the move with a veto. A few days later, the Syrian army resumed heavy shelling in the restive rebel-stronghold city of Homs. Government forces pounded the city which is a rebel stronghold and at least 95 people were killed last Monday alone. This situation has fuelled the fear that troops are planning to launch a ground assault. How did Syria get into this mess? The ruling Ba’ath Party came to power through a 1963 military coup d’état. The country remained politically unstable until 1970 when Hafez al-Assad, Bashar’s father, who was then the defence minister, seized power and declared himself president. He remained in that position until his death in 2000. There has never been an election to choose the presidents. Syrian citizens only approved the selection of their President through a referendum. The Ba’ath Party has remained the sole authority in Syria for many years. Hafez led Syria for 30 years during which he banned opposition at every level. In 1982, there was an Islamist insurgency throughout the country and Hafez descended heavily on Sunni Islamist community, including the Muslim Brotherhood. This incident became known as the “Hama massacre,” which left tens of thousands dead. This gave rise to the desire for change among many Syrians. Syria has also been under a state of emergency between 1963 and 2011. This development preceded Hafez’s assumption of office in 1970 and Bashar’s coming in 2000. Hafez did not stop the emergency rule throughout his reign and Bashar’s unwillingness to discontinue the policy was unwelcome to many Syrians. However, Bashar stopped the emergency rule in 2011 to appease the protesters. While it lasted, the emergency rule effectively gave security forces sweeping powers of arrest and detention. After taking power in 1970, Hafez also used the policy to rid the government of political adversaries and asserted his control over all aspects of Syrian society. Under the policy, he violently crushed opposition, especially in the 1982 Hama Massacre. Hafez died one year later, from pulmonary fibrosis. He was promptly succeeded by his son who was appointed after a constitutional amendment lowered the presidential age requirement from 40 to his age of 34. Bashar, who speaks fluent English and some French, is married to Asma, a British-born lady of Syrian roots. She moved to Syria to marry Bashar in December 2000 after quitting her job as an investment banker in London. The president’s age and exposure to Western culture initially inspired hopes for reforms. His coming actually led to the coinage of the term “Spring” to denote agitation for reform because Bashar’s ascension led to what Syrians called a “Damascus Spring” of intense political and social debate from July 2000 to August 2001. This period witnessed the emergence of numerous political groups of like-minded intellectuals which met in private houses to debate political and social issues. Political activists, such as Riad Seif, Haitham al-Maleh, Kamal al-Labwani, Riyad al-Turk and Aref Dalila were important in mobilising the movement. The most popular of the fora were the Riad Seif Forum and the Jamal al-Atassi Forum. The Damascus Spring ended in August 2001 with the arrest and imprisonment of 10 leading activists who had called for democratic elections and a campaign of civil disobedience. Renewed opposition activity occurred in October 2005, when activist like Michel Kilo collaborated with other leading opposition figures to launch the Damascus Declaration. The document labelled the Syrian government as “authoritarian, totalitarian and cliquish” and called for democratic reform. The hope that Bashar’s succession to the presidency would lead to the development of a more liberal society was dashed. In 2010, a report by Human Rights Watch had stated that Bashar had failed to improve human rights since taking over power a decade earlier. All other political parties still remained banned thereby making Syria a one-party state without free elections. The long-drawn hostility of some ethnic groups against Bashar’s rule has helped in fuelling the current tension. The al-Assad family comes from the minority Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam that is less than 12 percent of the Syrian population. Other ethnic groups were marginalised, especially the Kurds. Thousands of Syrian Kurds were denied citizenship in 1962. Their descendants continued to be labelled “foreigners” until last year when 120,000 out of roughly 200,000 stateless Kurds were granted citizenship on April 6. This development led to several riots and increased tension in Syria’s Kurdish areas since 2004. Even if all other groups relented in the current showdown, the Kurds are unlikely to give up until they witness Bashar’s exit. Since the government is dominated by the minority Shia Alawite sect, it has had to make some gestures towards the majority Sunni sects and other minority populations in order to retain power. But, incidents like these are resented also among the Sunni Muslim Islamists which accounts for about three quarters of Syria’s population. Also, socio-economic factors such as the deterioration in the country’s standard of living, a reduction of state support for the poor, resulting from the gradual shift towards a free market economy; the erosion of subsidies for basic goods and agriculture, free trade without suitable support for the local industry and high youth unemployment, have eroded the initial support for Bashar’s rule among the Syrians. As with much of the Middle East, high youth unemployment and economic disenfranchisement of young adults has been prevalent in Syria. In addition, the involvement Syrian youths in the labour market relative to adults is substantially low. This occurred in spite of the increasing youth population. Apart from this, there is repression of rights of expression, association and assembly in Syria. Women and ethnic minorities have faced discrimination in the public sector. While Bashar permitted radio stations to play Western pop music, websites such as Amazon.com, Facebook, Wikipedia and YouTube were blocked until January 1, 2011, when all citizens were permitted to sign up for

high speed Internet and given permission to use these sites. Initially, Bashar downplayed the likelihood that the revolt in the Arab world would extend to Syria. He asserted that his state was immune from the kind of mass protests that took place in Tunisia and Egypt, not realising that those words would later haunt him. As the revolt intensified in his domain later, the tune changed. Bouthaina Shaaban, a presidential adviser, blamed Sunni clerics and preachers for inciting Sunnis to revolt. Bashar shunned other groups and turned to his roots for help. The Syrian government has relied almost exclusively on Alawite-dominated units of the security services to fight the uprising. Maher al-Assad, Bashar’s younger brother commands the army’s Fourth Armoured Division, and Assef Shawkat, his brother-in-law, is deputy chief of staff of the army. The protest movement in Syria was at first modest, and took a while to gain momentum. The events began on January 26, 2011, when Hasan Ali Akleh from Al-Hasakah poured gasoline on himself and set himself on fire in the same way Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi had done in Tunis on December 17, 2010. According to witnesses, the action was “a protest against the Syrian government.” On January 28, 2011, an evening demonstration was held in Ar-Raqqah to protest the killing of two soldiers of Kurdish descent. On February 3, a “Day of Rage” was called for in Syria from February 4 to 5, on social media websites. Hundreds marched in Al-Hasakah but Syrian security forces dispersed the protesters and arrested dozens of demonstrators. But, by March 15, the movement began to gain momentum. Simultaneous demonstrations took place in major cities across Syria. By January 2012, thousands of former soldiers had defected to the rebel side, forming the Free Syrian Army. Many lives have also been lost as the people marched on relentlessly. Human rights groups and activists say more than 7,000 people have been killed by Syrian security forces since the uprising began last March. The UN stopped estimating the death toll in Syria after it passed 5,400 in January, saying it was too difficult to confirm. The Syrian government also claims that at least 2,000 members of its security forces have been killed in the unresolved crisis. When will it all end? And how will it end with Bashar still in control or out of contention? Time will tell. President of Maldives Forced Out Endurance Akoro When Muhamed Nasheed assumed office as the president of Maldives in 2008, his countrymen were excited. His ascension to power marked the end of the 30-year reign of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. Maldivians danced and cheered on the streets to celebrate the victory of the charismatic pro-democracy activist who had been repeatedly jailed by Gayoom’s regime. But today, the story has changed. The same people that danced when he was sworn in also booed him out of office just a few months before the expiration of his first tenure in office as the president of Maldives. The journey to the top was not easy for Nasheed but, it was a humiliating descent for him. Nasheed resigned and handed over power to Mohamed Waheed Hassan Manik, the vice- president, who was sworn in February 7. The resignation marked a stunning fall for Nasheed, a former human rights campaigner and environmental celebrity. Nasheed, who presented his resignation in a nationally televised address last Tuesday afternoon said: “I resign because I am not a person who wishes to rule with the use of power. I believe that if the government were to remain after power it would require the use of force which would harm many citizens. He said if he had decide to remain in office, he might be sanctioned. Signs of unrest had been manifesting in Maldives for some times now, Nasheed faced constant opposition from those loyal to former President Gayoom and from religious conservatives who accused him of being anti-Islamic. Maldivians demonstrated against soaring prices which they blamed on economic reforms undertaken to bridge the budget deficit. Islamic activists also protested in demand of more religiously conservative policies. The police routinely cracked down on opposition protests in order to maintain law and order in the land. But the latest protests erupted after Nasheed ordered the military to arrest Abdulla Mohamed, the chief judge of the Criminal Court. The judge had ordered the release of a government critic he said had been illegally detained. Nasheed, who could not stand further breakdown of law and order in his country of three hundred thousand people, stepped aside for his vice-president that is expected to run a national unity government until next year’s presidential election. Iran Adamant on Nuclear Project The Iranian government has made it clear that it will continue to acquire materials to make nuclear weapons irrespective of whatever sanctions are imposed against it. In a bid to protect the nuclear project from prying foreign eyes, it is already moving it away from its main facility at Natanz further underground to a facility 220 feet underground near the holy site of Qom, known as Furdow. Several efforts by the US to stop the project have proved abortive. Sanctions have been imposed on the country and several Iranian embassies have been closed down in some countries but still Iran has remained unshaken. Last Sunday, Barack Obama, U.S President, authorised new measures to extend sanctions to all Iranian financial institutions and require financial institutions doing business in the United States to block and freeze transactions having suspected link to Iran. Previous sanctions had only required American banks to reject those transactions. The new sanctions imposed by the US on Iran are intended to increase the pressure on Tehran and perhaps reassure Israel, which is clearly worried about Iran’s accelerated pursuit of nuclear weapons. The new sanctions, however, may not provide too much consolation to Israel, which fears Washington, may not be approaching the Iran situation with the urgency that is required. In response, the Iran government castigated U.S over the new financial measures to disrupt the Iranian commerce. Already, the country is battling with a default on payment for rice purchases which signifies the biting effect of the sanctions on the staples of everyday life. In retaliation, lawmakers in Tehran, vowed to ban crude exports to European countries even before an EU oil embargo takes effect. The U.S. sanctions, targeting Iran’s Central Bank and giving U.S. banks new powers to freeze Iranian government’s assets, were the latest in a tightening web of international measures aimed at forcing the Islamic Republic to scrap its sensitive nuclear work.