

Global impact of Syria's crisis

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Some form of international mediation is needed to end repression. — Reuters

Syria's regime, led by Mr Bashar al-Assad, is battling a growing crisis, precipitated by its use of force against unarmed protesters. Steps such as the lifting of the 48-year-old state of Emergency, and harsh repressive measures have failed to curb the growing protests, which have spread to many cities. The crisis is set to deepen as there is no sign of a dialogue between the regime and the protesters.

Anti-regime demonstrations have occurred in the suburbs of the capital Damascus and Aleppo, the commercial centre. The measures taken by the security forces and secret police, large-scale arrests of suspected ring-leaders, cutting off international media access and reducing Internet connectivity, have drawn criticism from the international community.

Trade and normal economic life has been disrupted. Militias and plain-clothed security personnel have been actively searching out suspected protesters and hauling them off to prisons.

DEMOCRACY DEFICIT

Mr Bashar Assad, 45, came to power 11 years ago, with the credentials of a western-educated, urbane, tech-savvy reformer.

However, his reforms were relatively minor and did not address the fundamental issue of democratic deficit in Syria. Since 1946, when it became independent, Syria has had a record of instability and numerous military coups, with no stable democratic rule.

In 1970, a coup by a Baathist-military alliance, led by Mr Hafez al-Assad, made Syria a virtual one-party state. Mr Assad came from the relatively backward Alawite community, a fringe Shia sect.

But he forged a ruling elite with a coterie drawn from the military, Sunnis, business interests, and his clan members, buttressed by a feared all-pervasive secret service.

With Soviet support, Mr Hafez Assad's Syria became a key player in regional affairs, countering Israeli and US policies, and managing its troubled relations with its other neighbours — Turkey, Iraq and Jordan, and bringing most of Lebanon under its control. Over the years, Syria developed its strategic cooperation with Iran, allowing it to arm and train the Hezbollah in Lebanon to launch operations against Israel.

External threats from the US and Israel were cleverly utilised to bolster support for the regime. Syria is not a major oil producer like Libya. In 2005, OVL (India) and CNPC (China) jointly bought a 37 per cent stake in Syria's Al-Furat Petroleum Company that owns 39 oil and gas fields. OVL's share in the production of Syrian crude oil was 0.72 million tonnes in 2009-10. In addition, in 2009, OVL found oil in an onshore block in North-Eastern Syria, and the fields are under commercial development. India, therefore, has an important stake in stability and peace in Syria.

Given Syria's strategic location, it is not surprising that the strongest protests have taken place at its periphery. Syria's 22 million population is fairly diverse, with Sunni Muslims (74 per cent), Shia Muslims (13 per cent), Christians (10 per cent and Druze (3 per cent).

There is a substantial Diaspora of 18 million, the result of migration over the decades. But Syria has a good record of inter-community harmony and the Sunni Islam practiced is relatively liberal.

GEO-POLITICAL IMPACT

With protests spreading across Syria, there is growing instability in the region. The opposition is yet to coalesce into an organised group. There is the danger of extremist Islamic elements such as al-Qaeda getting drawn into the struggle if it is indefinitely prolonged.

The Syrian military so far is obedient to the regime, but cracks may develop under pressure of a prolonged conflict. Realising that despite repression, the protests have spread, the regime plans a wide-ranging dialogue and has ordered

security forces not to fire on peaceful protesters.

Hardliners within the regime, including some close relatives of Mr Assad and those close to Iran, are pressing for more severe measures.

The US has been supporting anti-regime activities, including funding for the Barada TV channel. It has imposed some sanctions against the Assad regime and there are growing pressures on the US President, Mr Barack Obama, for more aggressive action.

A democratic regime in Syria would greatly reduce Iran's influence. Settling the Golan Heights issue and peace with Israel would become more feasible.

Global mediation

Iran has a huge stake in maintaining the Shiite Alawite-led Assad regime in place. It has access to the Hezbollah through Syria and a naval presence on the Syrian coast.

For Lebanon, the Hezbollah can be counted upon to fully support the Assad regime, while the Christian groups, which have opposed Syrian interference in Lebanon, and have their own militias, could use the long and porous eastern border with Syria to support opposition elements in areas along the Syrian coast.

Some form of international mediation is badly needed to end the conflict.

The UN should send a special representative to Syria to meet leading parties to the conflict and bring about a peaceful dialogue process. If nothing is done, violence in Syria will grow, leading to a major refugee problem, destabilising the Arab-Israeli peace process, Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey. India which has a stake in Syria's oil resources and is on the UN Security Council, would need to react carefully to future developments.

India has an important stake in stability and peace in Syria, given its oil interests in that country. A democratic regime would reduce Iran's influence and facilitate peace with Israel.

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