

A DICTATOR'S WORDS

A year of protest and killing in Syria has resulted in the deaths of about 9,000 people. Activists show no signs of surrender and the government shows no sign of backing down, as President Bashar al-Assad has said on many occasions.

BEFORE THE UPRISING

In January 2011, six weeks before Syria erupted in protest and as the Arab Spring rocked the Middle East, President Bashar al-Assad gave an interview to the *Wall Street Journal*.

“We have more difficult circumstances than most of the Arab countries, but in spite of that Syria is stable. Why? Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people. This is the core issue. When there is divergence between your policy and the people’s beliefs and interests, you will have this vacuum that creates disturbance.”

“Reform in politics is important, but it is not as important and urgent as the people waking every day and they want to eat, to have good health, to send their children to good schools. That is what they want. I want to feel safe in my own country. That is my goal.”

START OF THE UPRISING

On March 30 — two weeks after the uprising began — Mr. Assad addressed the People’s Assembly. He did not appear too worried, but warned that people were either for or against the government.

“The conspirators are few.... We didn’t understand what is happening until vandalism acts started.”

“To bury sedition is a national, moral and religious duty, and everyone who can contribute to its burial and doesn’t do so is part of it. Hence sedition is more severe than killing, as the Holy Koran says. Those who get involved in the sedition, whether intentionally or unintentionally, work for the killing of their homeland. Consequently, there is no place for those who stand in the middle. We, however, will not hesitate to defend our causes, interests and principles.”

THE DEATH TOLL RISES

On April 17, Mr. Assad addressed his new government and appeared almost conciliatory. In the previous weeks, there had been more than 100 people killed in Daraa following mass protests. There were also killings in other cities, and demonstrations reached the outskirts of Damascus.

“The last three or four weeks were telling.”

“The most dangerous thing is the existence of contradiction between the direction we are moving in and the direction the people are moving in. The outcome in that case will be zero, and the achievement will be moving backward. The important thing, as I said, is to stress these channels of communication because the lack of communication with the citizens creates a feeling of frustration and a feeling of anger, particularly when there are daily needs within the capacity of the state [to deal with] and yet we do not provide them. In that case, the results will not be good.”

SYRIAN SIEGES

On June 20, the President took a harder line when he spoke at Damascus University. The previous months had seen sieges in towns such as Daraa, Douma, Homs and Talkalakh. Days earlier, Syrian TV reported that 120 soldiers had been ambushed and killed in Jisr al-Shughour. Hillary Clinton, U.S. Secretary of State, called into question Mr. Assad’s legitimacy as head of state.

“We have decided to control events rather than letting events control us—we will lead rather than be led.”

“It doesn’t require much analysis, based on what we heard from others and witnessed in the media, to prove that there is indeed a conspiracy.... Germs exist everywhere, on the skin and within the guts.”

“The crisis might give us a bloody nose, might give us pain, might shake us, might throw us on the ground, but we should rise again stronger and more tenacious in order to carry out our life normally.”

“For [outlaws], chaos is a golden opportunity that should be grasped in order to ensure that they remain free and persist in their illegal activities. You may be asking about the number of these outlaws and wanted individuals. The number is 64,000, more or less, and this equals, in military terms, almost five military divisions, almost a whole army. If a few thousands of those wanted to carry weapons and engage in sabotage, you can imagine what damage could be caused.”

“The state is like a mother or father who embraces everyone and accommodates all her children; the state’s relationship with them is based on tolerance and love, not on hatred and revenge. But this does not mean the abandonment of toughness when it comes to harming the public interest.”

“The power of the state is derived from the power of the people, whose power is derived from their dignity, which in turn is derived from their freedom, which is again derived from the power of their state. So, let the people embrace the state and let the army, the security personnel, the police and the people work hand in hand to prevent sedition, protect the homeland and ensure its supremacy.”

HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

In July, 500,000 protested in Hama on several occasions, provoking a crackdown by troops. Protests in Damascus were met by troops opening fire. The UN voiced concern over human rights violations, but in an Army Day speech Mr. Assad appeared uncompromising.

“Syria is used to creating victories and defeating the enemies of the nation. It knows how to do it, to add new victories and leave warmongers and blood merchants to taste the bitterness of defeat and disappointment.”

NO CRACKDOWNS

In December, it was estimated that more than 5,000 people had been killed since unrest began. The Arab League joined the West in applying sanctions to Syria. In an interview with ABC journalist Barbara Walters on Dec. 7, Mr. Assad denied there had been crackdowns and attributed deaths to mistakes.

“Not everybody in the street was fighting for freedom. You have different components — you have extremists, religious extremists, you have outlaws, people who have been convicted in the courts.”

“We don’t kill our people.... No government in the world kills its people, unless it’s led by a crazy person. For me, as President, I became President because of the public support. It’s impossible for anyone, in this state, to give order[s] to kill people.”

“We have militants, ... killing soldiers and killing civilians. This morning, we lost nine civilians, killed in Homs, in the middle of Syria, and they are supporters. Most of the victims are government supporters.”

NO COMPROMISE

With experts, analysts and some government officials contemplating military intervention, and with the death toll at more than 6,000, on Jan. 10 Mr. Assad spoke again at Damascus University, where he pledged to strike the “terrorists” hard.

“In cases of war or confrontation, states rearrange their priorities. Our utmost priority now ... is the restoration of the security we have enjoyed for decades. This will only happen by striking these murderous terrorists hard. There is no compromise with terrorism, no compromise with those who use arms to cause chaos and division, no compromise with those who terrorize civilians, no compromise with those who conspire with foreigners against their country and against their people.”

Weeks later, the government began a month-long bombardment of the rebel-held city of Homs, resulting in hundreds reportedly being killed and several massacres.

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