

Syria - What's behind the protests?

By [Joyce Chediak](#)

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People in the U.S. and around the world have broad sympathy for the popular demonstrations taking place in the Middle East. All the uprisings, however, are not necessarily the same.

Protests against Western client regimes, such as those in Egypt and Tunisia that have so severely squeezed the workers, have the potential to liberate the people from crushing poverty and repression. However, the situations in Libya and Syria are somewhat different.

These governments, though certainly flawed, have been targets of U.S. destabilization efforts for decades because they have taken positions independent from Washington. The Western powers, led by the U.S., are trying to take advantage of the wave of protests in the region to intervene in Libya and Syria in order to make these countries captives of Western colonialism and reduce the workers there to day laborers for imperialism.

Contrast this to Bahrain and Yemen, both ruled by U.S. client regimes long alienated from the workers who live and work there. These regimes have fired upon, arrested and tortured demonstrators. Yet neither country has been declared a no-fly zone, and neither government has been the object of sanctions. In Libya, however, the West's "humanitarian intervention" to "protect civilians" has meant six weeks of bombing that has destroyed much of the country's civilian infrastructure.

Now the same Western powers bombing Libya are threatening Syria, the sole remaining independent secular state in the Arab world. Both the U.S. and the Economic Union have imposed sanctions on Syrian government officials. Why?

For one thing, Washington is trying to break up the strategic progressive alliance between Syria and Iran. It is also trying to stop the crucial support Syria gives to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas on the West Bank. To do this, U.S. finance capital seeks to destabilize Syria, destroy its sovereignty and bring it back into the imperialist orbit.

Who is protesting in Syria?

Demonstrations are taking place against the Bashir Assad government in Syria, which has responded with force, at least on some occasions. But the actual character of these demonstrations remains unclear. To what extent are they true popular outpourings? What has been the governing Syrian Socialist Arab Baath Party's actual response?

Very clear is the fact that U.S. imperialism is trying to use these protests to its own advantage. This has nothing to do with any demands raised by Syrian workers, who are

suffering from an austerity plan imposed by the International Monetary Fund in 2006. Michel Chossudovsky wrote on May 3 that among the protests is “an organized insurrection composed of armed gangs” that entered the Syrian town of Dara’a from Jordan. (GlobalResearch.ca) Dara’a is where the protests began.

Meanwhile, the Syrian government-run media is not saying much, while the Western corporate media as well as Al Jazeera have been accused of exaggerating both the protests and the Syrian government repression. Russia Today on April 30 quotes a travel agent living in Syria who says pro-Assad rallies were called “anti-Assad” by Al Jazeera; anti-government protests reported by Al Jazeera and Reuters did not take place; and protest footage from other countries has been attributed to Syria.

While front-page articles give the impression that most of Syria has taken to the streets against Assad, most establishment Middle East pundits admit that the Syrian government, at this point, is supported by most Syrians.

Marxist political perspective needed

World finance capital and its media mouthpieces appear to be “setting up” the Syrian government. But imperialism is not all-powerful. It can be fought and defeated. What could the Syrian government and people have done, and still do, to avoid leaving an opening for the U.S. to intervene? What can close this opening now? Marxism provides the tools to answer these questions.

The Marxist term for the kind of government that exists in Syria is “bourgeois nationalist.” This is also true of Libya, Iran and Iraq before the U.S. invasion. They are nationalist because they seek to develop their countries free from imperialist domination. They are bourgeois because they are ruled by an exploiting class of capitalists.

Marxists support these governments against imperialism because they are manifestations of self-determination of the oppressed. This does not mean that Marxists support every policy of these governments.

Marxists also recognize that these regimes have a dual character. Bourgeois nationalists seek to push out the imperialists so they can better exploit their workers. But they have a common interest with the workers when imperialism threatens the country’s sovereignty. These governments cannot consistently fight imperialism, however; only the working class can.

On the front line with Israel

How has this worked in Syria?

Syria has been ruled since 1966 by a secular government dominated by the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party. The current head of state is Bashar Assad. Syria is a “front-line state,” having a border with Israel. This fact affects every aspect of Syria’s history and has made it an object of constant imperialist and Zionist pressure, which links the fate of the Syrian people to the Palestinian struggle.

Syria’s nationalization of a U.S. oil pipeline precipitated the 1967 war, when Israel attacked

and occupied Syria's Golan Heights, the Palestinian West Bank, the Gaza Strip and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. The Golan Heights has since been annexed by Israel.

While Syria plays a regionally progressive role right now, this was not always the case. In 1976 the Syrian government intervened on the side of Lebanon's fascists, who were armed by Israel, in Lebanon's civil war against a revolutionary Palestinian-Lebanese alliance. The Syrian capitalists feared that a revolutionary Lebanon might lead to their overthrow by Syrian workers.

Relentless pressure from the U.S. and Israel, however, and the refusal to return the Golan Heights have turned Syria's rulers back toward an anti-imperialist stance. The role they play today as an ally of Iran, of Hezbollah in Lebanon and of Hamas in Gaza is crucial to holding back U.S. and Israeli aggression in the region.

Capitalist downturn destabilizes independent states

Like other bourgeois nationalist governments, Syria has not broken with the capitalist world market, nor does it have the perspective to do so. Instead, it seeks a better deal in this market, which is completely dominated by Western banks. During economic downturns, nationalist governments like in Syria are forced by Wall Street to make economic concessions that attack the workers and stimulate the growth of a pro-imperialist elite, the "comprador bourgeoisie." This undermines the government's independence from imperialism while isolating it from the workers.

In 2006 Syria adopted an IMF plan calling for austerity measures, a wage freeze, opening the economy to foreign banks, and privatizing government-run industries. For working people this has meant unemployment, inflation and deteriorating social conditions. The imperialists know this.

"The Syrian state once brought electricity to every town, but ... can no longer afford the social contract of taking care of people's needs," wrote the New York Times on April 30.

"Critics of the regime say economic liberalization has benefited a group of élite businessmen, such as Rami Makhlouf, Mr. Assad's maternal first cousin who controls a significant amount of the economy, including SyriaTel, the country's mobile network operator." (Financial Times, April 26) According to the New York Times report, Makhlouf, a focus of dissent, has become a symbol of "crony capitalism, making the poor poorer and the connected rich fantastically wealthy."

The Syrian government could protect itself from imperialist destabilization by reversing this economic attack on the workers, whose support constitutes Syria's best strength. Measures could include reversing the liberalization of the economy by barring the penetration of foreign capital; reinstating state ownership of electricity, communications and other key industries; prioritizing food production; and restoring subsidies. This would win back those elements of the population who are protesting, restore their faith in the government, and make sure there is no fertile soil for imperialist destabilization.

At the same time, workers and progressives here must oppose U.S. intervention in Syria in every way possible. For the imperialists to regain total control would be the worst thing for all the oppressed people in the Middle East and for the working class and oppressed people

here at home as well.

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