

Nikolaos van Dam: Tragically, a bloodbath may now be inevitable

Comment

The Independent, Saturday, 11 June 2011

The latest actions of the Syrian regime yesterday indicate that all this is bound to lead to further bloody confrontation. The leadership knows that it is in danger, but it simply will not give up peacefully.

After all, it has seen what happened in Egypt, where Hosni Mubarak faces jail or perhaps even the death penalty.

So who is controlling the situation? It is clear that Bashar al-Assad doesn't have his own army and security people under control, and indeed, maybe never did. Bashar was parachuted on to the top of the regime to prevent disunity among the officers and ensure continuity, taking over from his father, Hafez, but that doesn't mean he has much power. He is not the one who issues the orders to shoot and kill; it is those who for tens of years have got used to acting with violence and intimidation. It was telling that a few weeks ago, the President's spokeswoman said Assad had ordered that there should be no more shooting, but it simply went on. He was apparently not in charge. But that does not mean that as president he is not fully responsible.

The situation is very different to Egypt, where the military is, more or less, still in place after the downfall of Mubarak. In Syria, the military is much more closely linked to the president. If he goes, his inner circle goes, albeit not without bloody confrontation. The leadership faces a major dilemma: reform could end this conflict, but they realise that any real reform will in the end lead to the disappearance of the present regime and the monopoly of the Baath Party.

The Syrian government is trying to start a national dialogue but I haven't seen any signs yet to suggest that the opposition wants to talk, unless certain preconditions are being met. The regime, after all, started this violence, and now it seems to be receiving it back. The regime reported that 120 of its forces died in Jisr al-Shughour at the hands of armed gangs, while some witnesses have suggested that it was in fact fighting between the military and its own defectors. If the violence at Jisr al-Shughour was because of defections then the regime really is in trouble.

The biggest danger to the regime is from within the armed forces. There will be some in the military who simply completely disagree with the atrocities which are taking place. Events may encourage them to plot against the regime and that could lead to the bloodiest confrontation yet.

Nikolaos van Dam is a former Dutch ambassador and has written extensively about Syria. The fourth edition of his book 'The Struggle for Power in Syria' has just been released.

The protest in numbers

1,300 people have been killed, Syrian rights groups say.

10,000 people have been arrested, with reports emerging of torture in custody.

4,000 civilians have fled to Turkey fearing a crackdown on Jisr al-Shughour.

6,000 have sought refuge in Lebanon, but many have been forcibly returned.

325,000 soldiers and other personnel make up Syria's armed forces.