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Syria's president

Ever more embattled

For President Bashar Assad, things are going from bad to worse

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Praying in Homs for Assad to go

THE president of Syria is in a fix. Bashar Assad must decide whether to copy the tactics of Hosni Mubarak, who tried too late to appease the protesters, or those of Muammar Qaddafi, who killed many hundreds of his people when they turned against him. But he is swinging between those two poles. Neither course is doing him much good. The killing of at least 15 people in the early hours of April 19th in Homs, the country's third city after Damascus, the capital, and Aleppo, may have marked a turning point. Mr Assad's grip looks increasingly weak.

His first attempt at dampening dissent by promising reform, in an address to parliament on March 30th, was a failure, because his belated offer seemed vague and haughtily insincere. On April 16th he tried again, this time with a speech to government insiders. He said citizens needed dignity. He acknowledged Syria's economic woes and spared his audience his usual railing against foreign conspiracies. He sounded more sincere (and more desperate) than before. He may even have been trying to signal a change of tack. But the people on the street no longer take much notice. The protests in Homs got going immediately after his second speech.

Getting a foothold in that city is a big step for the opposition, which had failed to foment sustained unrest in the heart of Damascus or Aleppo. On April 18th thousands of demonstrators sat down in Homs's main square, which they renamed Tahrir (Liberation) Square, after the Cairo one. But at 2am, after the protesters refused to move, the security forces opened fire with tear-gas and bullets.

The next day Mr Assad promised, not for the first time, to lift the emergency laws that have been in use since 1963 and have given the security forces carte blanche to deal with dissent. But this, too, may have come too late. At rallies across the country, chants calling for Mr Assad's resignation have begun to drown out those calling for reform. In any case, the lifting of emergency laws, finally announced on April 19th, may not necessarily improve the behaviour of the security services. Nor has Mr Assad promised to free political prisoners.

Yet if he were to meet all of the protesters' demands, his regime

might be fatally weakened. Dominated by members of the minority Alawite sect, to which the president belongs, it depends on the loyalty of the security forces, which are bought off by largesse. If, as the protesters demand, this patronage system were ended, Mr Assad's hand would be severely weakened. Likewise, a promise to legalise opposition parties could be politically suicidal.

He is also taking a risk by blaming conservative Sunnis for the recent troubles, linking them to militant Islamists such as al-Qaeda. "Their terrorist activities will not be tolerated," say government spokesmen. Such charges raise the spectre of the 1980s, when a revolt by the Muslim Brothers was ruthlessly suppressed, leaving around 20,000 dead. Mr Assad may not be as brutal as his father, Hafez Assad, who oversaw that wave of repression—and survived. Yet if he is not, his days in charge may be numbered.

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