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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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Al Jazeera

Syria braces for mass demonstrations

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Syrian opposition movements are readying for a day of rallies, dubbed "Friday of Martyrs", across the country even as authorities announced a raft of measures aimed at meeting some of the protesters' demands.

"Our date is Friday, from all houses, all places of worship, every citizen and every free man, to all squares, for a free Syria," said a statement posted on the Facebook group The Syria Revolution 2011.

The group, whose organisers remain anonymous, has been a driving force behind protests which erupted on March 15 and have taken root in the tribal region of Daraa, south of the capital, and the multi-religious coastal city of Latakia.

Facing increasing demands for reform, Syria's president has set up committees to look into the deaths of civilians during nearly two weeks of unrest and replace decades-old emergency laws.

The move on Thursday appeared to be a carefully designed attempt by **President Bashar al-Assad** to show he will not be pressured to implement reform, instead, he will make changes at his own pace.

The state-run Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) reported that investigative committees have been set up to look into possible causes in the deaths of protesters, including the 1962 census in east Syria, which resulted in many Kurds being denied nationality.

On Wednesday, Assad **defied expectations** that he would announce sweeping changes, instead blaming two weeks of popular revolt on a foreign conspiracy during his first public address since the protests began.

Al Jazeera's Rula Amin, reporting from Damascus, said the "promise of investigation", a day after Assad failed to announce any reforms during his widely anticipated speech, proves that the Syrian government "is going to move at its own pace with regard to change".

Emergency law

Syrian TV said the ruling Baath Party's regional command formed a committee made up of legal experts to study legislation that would "guarantee the country's security and dignity of Syrians and combat terrorism".

"This would pave the way for lifting the state of emergency laws," it said. The widely despised, decades-old **emergency laws** give the regime a free hand to arrest people without charge.

The state-run news agency said the committee would complete its study by April 25.

Syrian TV also said Assad has set up a judicial committee tasked with urgently investigating the circumstances that led to the death of Syrian civilians and security forces in the southern city of Daraa and port city of Latakia.

Assad dismissed his **32-member cabinet** on Tuesday in a move designed to mollify the anti-government protesters, but the overture was largely symbolic.

Assad holds the lion's share of power in the authoritarian regime, and there are no real opposition figures or alternatives to the current leadership.

The protests were **sparked off** by the arrest of several teenagers who wrote anti-government graffiti on walls in the southern city of Daraa.

They spread to other parts of the country last week, and human rights groups say more than 60 people have been killed since March 18 as security forces cracked down on the demonstrations.

'Major conspiracy'

In **Assad's speech** before parliament on Wednesday, his first speech since the protests began, he said Syria is being subjected to a "major conspiracy".

He made only a passing reference to the protesters' calls for change, saying he was in favour of reform, but acknowledged there have been delays.

"The question is what reforms do we need," he said, without offering any specifics.

Social networking sites immediately responded with activists calling on Syrians to take to the streets.

Sectarian

tensions

Within hours of Assad's speech, residents of the Mediterranean port city of Latakia said troops opened fire during a protest by about 100 people, although it was not immediately clear whether they were firing in the air or at the protesters. The residents asked that their names not be published for fear of reprisals.

Latakia, which has a potentially volatile mix of different religious groups, already has become a flashpoint for violence that could take on a dangerous sectarian tone in the coming days and weeks.

The anti-government protests and ensuing violence have brought Syria's sectarian tensions into the open for the first time in decades, a taboo topic because Syria has a Sunni majority ruled by minority Alawites, a branch of Shia Islam.

Assad has placed his fellow Alawites into most positions of power in Syria.

However, he also has used increased economic freedom and prosperity to win the allegiance of the prosperous Sunni Muslim merchant classes, while punishing dissenters with arrest, imprisonment and physical abuse.

Assad, who inherited power 11 years ago from his father, appears to be following the same strategy of other autocratic leaders who attempt to quell uprisings by offering minor concessions coupled with brutal crackdowns.

The formula failed in Tunisia and Egypt, where citizens accepted nothing less than the ouster of the regime.