

**Syrian
protesters
call for
Assad's
downfall as
economic
crisis
deepens**



The Guardian

Bethan McKernan

June 12,2020

Marches held on streets of Sweida amid soaring food prices and disillusion with corruption

A town in regime-controlled Syria is set for fresh protests this weekend as a burgeoning economic crisis engulfing even Bashar al-Assad's most loyal supporters poses the biggest challenge to his grip on the country in years.

Food is now more expensive than at any other time during the nine-year conflict, triggering scenes reminiscent of the Arab spring protests of 2011 on the streets of the nominally government-loyal town of Sweida this week.

"We don't want to live, we want to die in dignity," and "He who starves his people is a traitor," protesters chanted as they marched for consecutive days in the southern city, calling for the downfall of the president and ruling Baath party. Another demonstration is scheduled for Saturday.

Assad has all but won Syria's war, but he is currently struggling on multiple other fronts, including the threat of the coronavirus, a feud with Syria's richest man, his cousin Rami Makhlouf, and balancing the divergent interests of his backers in Moscow and Tehran.

The president's biggest problem by far, however, is the financial turmoil next door in Lebanon, which has helped send the Syrian economy into meltdown. New US sanctions against his regime that come into force next week could be potentially devastating.

Syria's currency has already nosedived in recent months, falling this week to a record 3,500 pounds to the dollar on the black market, compared with 700 at the beginning of the year. As a result, the cost of living has soared and basics such as flour, sugar, rice and medicine are increasingly hard to find.

More than 80% of the country now lives below the poverty line, while the children of regime officials show off sports cars, jewellery and technological gadgets on their Instagram accounts.

On Thursday, Assad sacked his prime minister, Imad Khamis, in an attempt to mollify growing public anger, but even in Assadist strongholds such as the coastal city of Latakia people are becoming bolder in their criticism of regime corruption. Public figures including MPs, business leaders and members of the army have all openly criticised government policy in recent weeks.

“When your kids are hungry, you don’t think of strongmen, you don’t think of what Russia wants, you don’t worry about geopolitics. You blame the person who is in charge. And I see it happening on a daily basis, from people way up in the regime all the way [down] to the average loyalist,” said the activist Shoueb Rifai.

“Assad’s biggest risk is no longer what Putin wants, or what Iran wants, or what regional powers are scheming. It is his own people, sitting in a pressure cooker.”

Meanwhile, in north-western Idlib province, the last part of the country controlled by Sunni opposition groups, the currency collapse has caused the price of bread to spike by 60%, triggering demonstrations against Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the dominant jihadist group in the area.

While the Turkish lira has been in circulation in rebel areas for years, HTS’s civilian wing announced on Thursday that it will begin paying salaries in the Turkish currency to insulate the local population from the Syrian pound’s continued fall.

Despite a ceasefire brokered by Ankara and Moscow, this week also saw Russian warplanes carry out the first airstrikes on Idlib and the surrounding area in three months, in which at least three people were killed.

The push to retake Idlib at the beginning of this year caused the worst displacement crisis of Syria’s war to date, driving 1 million people from their homes to already overcrowded camps on the Turkish border.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/12/syrian-protesters-call-for-assads-downfall-as-economic-crisis-deepens>