

Thousands join Syria Facebook protest drive

Contributed by Abigail Fielding-Smith in Beirut, Financial Times
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Thousands of people have joined a Facebook page calling for demonstrations in the Syrian capital this week.

More than 2,000 people have joined the page calling for a "day of rage" on February 4 and 5, which is also being organised on the social networking site Twitter.

Facebook is banned in Syria, but it is relatively easy to access through proxy servers.

Since popular frustration at joblessness and authoritarianism exploded in Tunisia and Egypt, there has been speculation that Syria, which has been ruled under a state of emergency law since 1963, and where poverty levels are rising, might see mass protests.

The organisers of the demonstration say they want to "end the state of emergency in Syria and end corruption".

Even Syria's civil society activists, however, do not anticipate an immediate domino effect. "The situation in Syria is different and more difficult, it's more complicated," said Mazen Darwish from the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, adding that the regime still had a significant amount of popular support.

Mr Darwish also said that the Facebook call to demonstrate had been made from Syrians living abroad, which limited its effectiveness.

One thing which differentiates Syria's president, Bashar al Asad, from his Tunisian and Egyptian counterparts is that he has consistently defied the west in his foreign policy, a stance which resonates with the majority of the population.

Since the outbreak of protests in Tunisia, however, the government has increased heating oil subsidies for public workers by 72 per cent, in spite of the budget deficit, in an apparent attempt to pre-empt unrest.

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