

Wind of Change: Is Syria next?

Contributed by Reuters, Damascus
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On the surface all is calm in Syria, tightly ruled by the same authoritarian party for half a century, despite the upheaval in several of its Arab neighbours. Below, ordinary Syrians are quietly captivated by the tumult. What began as a popular uprising that toppled the Tunisian government before spreading into Algeria, Jordan, Yemen, Sudan and, of course, Egypt, may now be headed for Syria. Opposition movements in Syria are calling for mass protests on Saturday against the rule of President Bashar Al-Assad. The groups are organising on Facebook, with several pages promoting protests in Damascus, Aleppo and other cities. Protest organisers want better living standards, human rights improvements and a greater voice for youth, according to the Middle East Media Research Institute, a Washington-based organisation that studies and translates news accounts and social-media postings. The government has barely commented on the six days of unprecedented protests against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, and its control over the media has stifled public reaction in a country struggling with similar poverty and unemployment. "People are afraid to express an opinion, but between themselves they're saying: 'Mubarak be damned'," said a man waiting for a haircut at a Damascus barber. "What are the authorities waiting for? Are they waiting for instability to hit Syria before they act? Open the country up," another man said. But there is no sign that the upheaval in Egypt will spark reform in Syria. The government raised a key fuel subsidy and tightened Internet controls, while a special security court jailed a 69-year-old leftist for seven years this month for discussing alternatives to the Baath Party's monopoly on power. Both Syria and Egypt have similar Gross Domestic Product per capita at around \$2,500 and two great rivers -- Egypt the Nile and Syria the Euphrates.