

The Security Council uses its veto against the people of Syria

On Waitangi weekend the lead news stories in New Zealand were the debate over whether the public should be exposed to images of Piri Weepu bottle-feeding his baby daughter and the inevitable protests which have become an annual way to celebrate Waitangi Day. This annual day of protest could, probably should, be seen as a sign of a healthy democracy. On the other side of the world, citizens of Syria had bigger problems: more people were killed in their homes, in their streets, in police stations and other detention centres just because they stood up to and protested against their own ruthless government. Human Rights Watch, the Qatar-based news network Aljazeera and others have documented countless stories of blood-curdling torture in Syria over the past days, weeks and months since the uprising against Basher al-Assad and his regime began. You have to have a strong stomach to be able to read the accounts of what happens to people in Syria when they voice disapproval of their government. The concept of “human rights” in Syria is a far cry from our interpretation of it in New Zealand. In Syria, if you protest (and even if you don’t) you might have your fingernails removed, you might be hung by your ankles from the ceiling for hours and beaten with cables; you will be cut, bruised and broken and – more than likely – you will be killed. What is happening in Syria is a crime against humanity and those responsible – from Assad all the way down – must be held to account. But who is willing to do that?

It seems increasingly clear that life in Syria is cheap and protest will not be tolerated by the Assad regime. Martin Luther King once said that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice

everywhere. Unfortunately, the Security Council doesn't see it that way. On 4 February 2012, the Security Council spectacularly let down the people of Syria by failing to pass a resolution that might condemn Assad for his actions. The resolution was not calling for Assad to step aside (even though regime change is exactly what the people are calling for); it was not calling for military intervention; it was not calling for much at all. But despite being a watered down and pathetic response to the murders and torture being committed on a daily basis, Russia and China decided to veto it anyway. Given that the veto coincided with Assad's new bloody crackdown on Homs with the deaths of around 300 people in a single day – the bloodiest of the revolution so far - the clear signal from the leaders of the international community was this: Mr Assad, please carry on. As French Ambassador Gerard Araud said after the vote, "It's a sad day for the Council, it's a sad day for Syrians and it's a sad day for supporters of democracy." Assad was given a license to kill.

If you were living in Syria today, what would you be thinking? The Security Council can't help you, the Arab League can't help you and the most militarily powerful countries in the world seem helpless in the face of China and Russia's stand against the human rights of Syrian civilians. The effectiveness of the Security Council, and the future of the veto power, must again be questioned. The Council has been shown to be completely thwarted by the cowardice use of the veto by two of the permanent five members. In the face of continued acts of brutality against its own people, instead of action, world leaders continue to call for "dialogue" and not much else. Assad's forces are seemingly everywhere and they are armed to the teeth. They

have no mercy: they can come into your home, shoot you in the street, take and torture your family and then release statements to the media denying everything and claiming, ridiculously, that this is all a “foreign plot” to destabilise the country. So far, every regime in the region has resorted to the “foreign plot” line and no one is buying it. Ironically, the anti-Assad rebels captured two groups of Iranians in the north-west of Syria last week. Iran claimed that the first group were “tourists” and the second group were “religious pilgrims”. The latter group were found in Idlib which, as anyone familiar with the area will tell you, has absolutely no sites of interest to Shi’ite pilgrims. Perhaps there is a foreign element in the conflict but it’s most likely at the invitation, and on the side of, the Assad regime.

Clearly, what the Syrian people must do (and have been doing) is rely on themselves for that is their only option. If other states want to help, they can at least provide the Free Syrian Army with weapons and give the citizens some chance to defend themselves against the brutality of their own government. There is a precedent for this – the Libyans had outside assistance to topple Gaddafi. Ordinary citizens in free countries can protest against what is happening and ask their governments to eject Syrian ambassadors (and their families, all of whom are connected to the Ba’ath Party). Sanctions against the regime must include Assad himself, and his family which up until now they have not. Make no mistake: Assad (and his Alawite regime) will be brought down, just as the regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya were brought down. The people will not back down because they have had enough of repression and brutality – and they have lost their fear.

Will Assad run away and seek exile in a friendly country (like Ben Ali), be brought to trial on a hospital bed feigning illness (like Mubarak) or be hunted down whilst on the run (like Gaddafi)? The Syrian people will remove this regime from power, for sure. The Arab Revolution still has plenty of revolt left in it.

Word count: 977

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