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[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

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Reuters

## Protest erupts in Syria's Homs despite new law

*By Khaled Yacoub Oweis*

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Syrians took to the streets in large numbers again on Wednesday in the central city of Homs, where activists say more than 20 pro-democracy protesters have been shot dead since Monday by soldiers and irregular forces.

Protesters' chants demanded "the downfall of the regime," defying a heavy deployment of security forces and an order by officials to stop all forms of demonstration.

The protest went ahead despite a concession by the government, which approved legislation on Tuesday ending the state of emergency in force in Syria for the last 48 years.

In the city of Baniyas, in what was seen as another attempt to mollify protesters, the chief of the security police was sacked, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Five civilians were killed in Baniyas last week and residents identified security police chief Amjad Abbas as one of the officers seen beating a villager in the nearby town of Baida, the Observatory said, citing sources in Damascus.

The newly appointed cabinet, when ending the state of emergency, also approved legislation that requires Syrians to seek permission from the state before they demonstrate.

Security forces sealed off Baniyas last week after demonstrations against President Bashar al-Assad and an attack by irregular forces loyal to him on men guarding a Sunni mosque.

Inspired by uprisings across the Arab world, demonstrators across Syria have taken to the streets for more than a month demanding greater freedom, undaunted by a security crackdown.

Rights groups, which say more than 200 have been killed since the unrest started, have called for independent investigations into the actions of security forces.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Wednesday condemned the use of violence against protesters and said the Syrian government must stop arbitrary arrests, detention and the torture of prisoners.

## DEFIANT PROTESTS

Hours before Tuesday's cabinet meeting, the Interior Ministry had called on citizens to refrain from protesting at all. Activists said this, and the fact that a leftist opposition figure was arrested on Tuesday night, suggested the ending of the state of emergency did not mean the end of repression.

Protests continued overnight, including in the Damascus suburb of Zabadani where protesters called for freedom and the overthrow of Assad's rule, echoing the rallying cries of uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt.

There were also sit-ins in Jabla on the coast, a women's rally in Barzeh in Damascus, and a candlelight procession in Tel near the capital overnight.

In Syria's second city, Aleppo, Assad's irregular forces broke up a small demonstration at the city's university, beating several students and arresting 37, a rights activist said.

The U.S. State Department said the new law requiring permits to hold demonstrations made it unclear if the end of emergency rule would make for a less restrictive government.

A semi-official newspaper quoted an official source saying that, contrary to statements in March, there would be no new anti-terrorism legislation to replace emergency laws. "Articles specific to terrorism crimes are already provided for in the Syrian general law on punishment," he said.

Emergency rule, in place since the Baath Party seized power in a 1963 coup, gave security organs blanket power to stifle dissent through a ban on gatherings of over five people, arbitrary arrest and closed trials, lawyers say.

Syria is involved in several Middle East conflicts. Any change at the top -- Assad, backed by his family and the security apparatus, is Syria's absolute ruler -- would ripple across the Arab world and affect Syria's ally Iran.

The leadership backs the Islamist movement Hamas and Lebanon's Hezbollah but seeks peace with Israel. Assad was largely rehabilitated in the West after being isolated for years after the 2005 assassination of Lebanese statesman Rafik al-Hariri.