

Uprising in the Middle East Spreads to Libya

Libya's anti-government movement is stirring now.

Protesters dubbed Thursday as a "day of rage" and called for nationwide protests. They wanted it to coincide with the anniversary of two bloody episodes that marked the regime's 40+ years in power. At the same time, supporters of Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi gathered in the capital.

The tensions spilled over into unrest in at least four different cities. Having seen the wave of uprisings that ousted leaders in both Egypt and Tunisia, the government wasted no time in responding, offering raises for government employees and the release of 110 political prisoners.

Paul Estabrooks is a minister-at-large for Open Doors. He says, "It seems that a lot of people in that area want change. The issue is: what kind of change do they want, and what kind of change will come?"

Libya ranks Number 25 on the Open Doors World Watch List. The list is a compilation of the top 50 countries known for their persecution of believers around the world.

There is no constitution regulating religious freedom, but the Great Green Charter on Human rights does somewhat regulate it. However, if a Christian converts from Islam and is harassed or arrested by the police, there's no legal recourse. Estabrooks says in spite of what happened in Egypt, the scenario in Libya looks very different. "The chances are even slimmer there for change. The only thing might be in a more democratic type of government, an opportunity for minorities to be better protected."

That's a slim hope, however. Even if there were sweeping

political change, he says that “the basic attitudes don’t change. There’s simply a desire for political change that will make a difference for them economically, but we’re not optimistic at the moment, especially in Libya, that there would be any change for our brothers and sisters. But there is always hope in democratic situations.”

Libyan Christians are mostly underground. There is fear and distrust in the country because of the scrutiny of security forces and intelligent services. When posed with the question of whether or not believers are part of the push for change, as they were in Egypt, Estabrooks notes, “In Libya, we haven’t heard from our contacts there about their direct involvement as we did in Egypt.”

In terms of how believers are responding to the upheaval going on around them, he adds, “We honestly don’t know. Because their communities are small, it’s perhaps less likely for them to become public about their attitude and desire for change.”

What can be done? Two things, says Estabrooks. “The way to pray is to ask God to give them the opportunity to use this situation in order to share His love with others and to be able to be more open about their faith.”