

Syrian Christians Facing Uncertainty During Turmoil

Ongoing turmoil in the embattled nation of Syria means its Christians face uncertain futures.

Easter weekend was one of the bloodiest since the riots and anti-government demonstrations started in mid-March, leading some churches to cancel Easter services. The Associated Press reported 120 deaths last weekend across Syria and a total of 450 deaths since the unrest began.

Rahid, a Syrian church leader, says: "Christians are fasting from all food from today until Saturday. Please join us in prayer and fasting. We want peace in our country. Please pray for our government and our police and army, that they can maintain the peace."

Syria-watchers remain concerned about the effect that ongoing protests and uncertainties will have on the Syrian church. Syria's Christians, who number approximately 1.5 million, comprise 8 to 9 percent of the total population. They are members of Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant denominations.

Compared to some other Middle Eastern countries, Christians under the regime of President Bashar Assad have had relative freedom. The Open Doors 2011 World Watch List ranked Syria No. 38 of 50 worst persecutors of Christians. For the most part, the church of Syria is not hidden or secret. The believers there are known openly as Christians, and most people know where the churches are located. However, the evangelical church often faces problems when it reaches out with the gospel.

"The current situation in Syria is very uncertain for Christians in the country," says Rany, an Open Doors co-worker. "Under Assad the Christians have had a relatively

stable situation in which they can operate, and a change of government means probably a less favorable situation.”

Rany sees potential problems in the country if the current government is forced from power.

“Syria’s minorities include Sunnis, Shiites, Alawites, Christians, Druzes, Kurds and others. That is potentially an explosive mix,” he says. “I see a possible clashing of these minorities in which I think Christians will be possible victims of much violence.”

Most believers have not spoken out in the face of this societal unrest.

“Because of the fear of a worsening situation, churches are silent in the midst of the anti-government protests,” Rany says. “They are not involved in the protests against the president. They don’t want to attract attention to themselves.

“Where all the protests and violence in the country will lead to for Christians is not certain at all. That is why we are trying to take advantage of the existing liberty in the country. Right now we are trying to distribute literature and offer training to Christians. It is still possible to do this, but we don’t know for how long. Last year Open Doors offered training seminars about persecution.

“Sadly, some of our courses, which were scheduled to start, had to be cancelled for now. The church that would have hosted the course opted to postpone it. The church thought that some of the participants would not come because of the current situation.”

According to Rany, Syria needs prayer now more than ever before. “The problems in Syria did not start as a religious conflict, but it is changing to a religious one. Fanatic Muslim groups want to make it religious and are creating problems to make it go that way.”