

Stuck in the middle - Syria's moderate voices

By Lyse Doucet, BBC News

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Last month in Damascus, one young woman stood alone in the middle of a busy street outside parliament. Her banner, as big as her, declared "Stop the Killing."

Passers-by stopped to applaud her message. The authorities detained her.

But this lone act of bravery by "the woman in the red dress" was captured on video and became something much bigger. Others copied her burst of defiance.

"It started as a personal scream of anger but it spread widely," reflected the strikingly soft-voiced Rime Dali.

"It even gathered people who support the regime because we all want to stop the killing, and build a Syria for all Syrians."

Shortly after our meeting, she was briefly detained again as she attended a vigil for victims of last week's powerful blasts in the capital that left dozens dead and hundreds injured.

Dangerous divide

In Syria, moderate views are often drowned out by the louder harsher violence that captures the headlines. But other voices are there - on both sides of an increasingly dangerous divide.

In his gleaming new office with a panoramic view of the capital, journalist Ziad Haider is hopeful enough to open the Damascus bureau of a new TV Channel "Al Mayadeen" which has its headquarters in Beirut.

"We're already labelled I guess because we have permission from the Syrian government," he said, "but we want to tell a different story.

"We are against foreign intervention, against a military solution, coming from either side."

Asked whether he believed there was the political space to tell a different story, he said that's not his greatest worry now.

"Tasting coffee in the morning isn't the same anymore," he regretted. "It's not about what you will do that day, or what you will achieve, it's whether you will arrive home safely."

Some fear the explosions, others the arrests.

Sweeping campaign

In the last few weeks, Syrian authorities have stepped up their detention of leading intellectuals and activists, many of whom have nothing to do with the protests.

"Do you blame us, when we are under such threats?" retorted one government official who defended the sweeping campaign of arrests.

But it has raised new doubt about its commitment to reform.

"The government has more difficulty dealing with a political opposition than its armed opponents," remarked a European diplomat in the capital. "We are still waiting to see evidence of a genuine desire to change."

The arrests come as the UN accelerates its efforts to try to move this fractured country toward political dialogue. Its searching for the kind of independent voices now being locked away, beyond their reach.

Faez Sara used to have some faith in official pledges. Last year, he attended the government's "national dialogue."

But when I visited him at his office, sadness seemed to consume him. Last week, his two sons were picked up at 6 AM. He hasn't seen them since.

"It's not just my children," he said with a deep sigh, and a discreet wipe of a tear. "Children of colleagues who, like me, spent time in prison, have also lost family members. The whole country is in agony."

Asked whether he'd lost all faith in a peaceful way out, Faez Sara invoked the phrase "violence leads to violence, blood leads to blood."

"It may take more than peaceful protests to change this regime, but for now I believe this is the best way."

But for now, both sides are violating a month-old UN truce.

Growing anxiety

And the sophistication and force of last week's twin bombings in Damascus has reinforced intelligence reports that militant groups, including possibly al Qaeda, are trying to exploit the current chaos.

"There is a third party which doesn't want this crisis to end in a political solution," said journalist Ziad Haider.

"I would be extremely worried if the state was not powerful enough to deal with this situation. Both sides should act with wisdom."

Conversations with Syrians who still back the government's stated reform underline their growing anxiety over this country's future.

"It's hard to be stuck in the middle," remarked a government official who spoke, off the record, about the need for change. "Thugs on both sides are taking advantage of this situation."

But one activist, just released from detention, flatly rejected any notion this was tumbling towards a civil war.

"Weapons seem louder but the protest is definitely more peaceful than armed," insisted one woman who gave her name as Leyla.

"The estimate of the Free Syrian Army is thousands, maybe tens of thousands but there are hundreds of thousands of activists and this is not counting people who are with the revolution not taking action."

"We look for hope every day," remarked Rime Dali. "Its not something abstract for us."

"When we help each other, there's hope, when we try to open dialogue, to build bridges with people who have different views, we have hope."

The challenge is whether a myriad of hopeful voices, still holding fast to a different vision, can find a secure space within a growing spiral of violence.