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Subject: Assad forms committee to change Syria's constitution (Reuters)

AMMAN (Reuters) - President Bashar al-Assad formed a committee on Saturday to draft a new constitution within four months, the official news agency said, following a series of new laws that gave Syrians more freedom on paper after months of popular unrest.

Under pressure from street protests demanding the end to 41 years of Assad family rule, the president has lifted a state of emergency and promised "multi-party" parliamentary elections by February. But he has also deployed tanks and troops across the country to crush persistent demonstrations, casting doubt on the credibility of his reform gestures, pro-democracy activists say.

"President Assad issued today decree number 33 which stipulates forming a committee to prepare for a draft constitution," the state news agency SANA said.

The constitution, which was changed by Assad's late father, President Hafez al-Assad, in the 1970s, discourages any political pluralism by stipulating that the ruling Baath Party is "leader of the state and society."

The Syrian opposition has called for the clause to be scrapped, along with another that says the president can only be nominated by his Baath Party as well as numerous laws passed in the last 50 years which they say allow Assad and his security apparatus to practice repression and corruption with impunity.

The Baath banned opposition when it took power in a 1963 coup. The party organisation has lost power and status in the last decade to Assad family members, some selected cohorts and the secret police, a bloc now underpinning the power structure.

New laws issued by Assad in the past three months permit "parties committed to democratic principles" and established an election commission. But they also preserved quotas that retain the majority of seats for farmers and workers, whose representatives are drawn from state-controlled unions.

Syria's current parliament, a rubber stamp body, does not have a single opposition figure.

Human rights activists say that the official legal changes have not stopped repression on the ground that has killed 3,000 civilians or tackled extraordinary decrees that make the secret police, which rights activists say is responsible for most of the killings during the unrest, unanswerable to any law.

They point to recent laws that toughened punishments for people demonstrating without a license and widened Assad's scope to invoke nationwide military mobilisation to include "internal disturbances" and to

punish army deserters.

Syrian troops and police shot dead at least eight people protesting against Assad in the last 48 hours, activists said.

The United Nations called for international protection for civilians from a crackdown it said could lead to civil war between Syria's majority Sunni Muslims and members of Assad's minority Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shi'ite Islam.

The shootings, near Aleppo and in Damascus and its suburbs, occurred as protesters took to the streets as they have done many times since Syria's uprising began in March, inspired by popular revolts that have ousted three Arab leaders this year.

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