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Riots in Romania

Anger management

The government struggles to contain a growing protest movement

Jan 21st 2012 | BUCHAREST | from the print edition

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ROMANIANS are not often thought of as combustible folk. That may change after the country was overrun by street protests that show no sign of letting up. Bucharest, the capital, saw its worst violence for 20 years, as protesters burnt tyres and scuffled with riot police. Dozens were hurt and the city centre was damaged.

The riots were started by a public spat between Raed Arafat, a popular health-care official, and Traian Basescu, Romania's president, over a plan to privatise a medical-emergency system set up by Mr Arafat. The Palestinian-born doctor quit after Mr Basescu had called a television talk show to denounce his "leftist views".

The pro-Arafat demonstrations began on January 13th and reached their violent peak two days later, thanks partly to football hooligans, well used to fighting with the police. On January 16th the police made over 100 arrests. That largely stopped the violence but did not quell the anger. As the protests spread, the government said it would rethink its health plans. On January 17th it gave Mr Arafat his job back, pledging that he would be part of the team working to revise the proposals. "Not even the president is perfect," said Emil Boc, the prime minister, blaming the crisis on "misunderstandings". Mr Arafat said he was amazed by his support.

By then the protesters had other things on their minds. As many as 10,000 people continued their protests in 60 towns and cities across the country, demanding snap elections and Mr Basescu's resignation. Several told reporters that the treatment of Mr Arafat had just been "the spark" for the protests, and that their anger was deeper. They had a wide range of grievances, from poverty to the effect of austerity measures linked to an IMF programme and inconsistent tax rises. Some even called for the return of Romania's monarchy.

There is an odd mix of students, the retired and those who have steered clear of any political involvement. On figures who ventured into Bucharest's heart of the protests, got a chilly reception, and with a general election due at the end of the year, any messages they bring forward are likely to go unheeded. "The start of electoral campaigning," says a participant in the Romanian Expert Forum, a think-tank.

Mr Basescu has the opposition more than twice as much support as the ruling Democratic Liberal Party. That means that Mr Basescu, whose mandate expires in 2014, may after November find himself working with a less docile prime minister than Mr Boc. Even if he can navigate today's choppy waters, the former sea captain can expect storms ahead.

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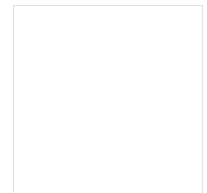
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