

Syria: A revolution on the march

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Since March 15th of this year, Syria has been experiencing a popular uprising against the dictatorial regime of Bashar al Assad. Faced with peaceful demonstrations by the Syrian masses initially demanding freedom and dignity, the dictatorship has responded with a bloodthirsty and ferocious repression. The number of civilian demonstrators killed is counted in the thousands, that of the detainees and the wounded in the tens of thousands. But the higher price that the Syrian people pay for democracy and freedom in comparison with the other revolutions in the Arab countries can only increase the geographic spread of the revolution to nearly every town and visibly increase the number of those in revolt. Today the masses in the Syrian streets chant the slogan of all the Arab revolutions – the people want the fall of the regime!

A dictatorial, corrupt, hereditary regime

Bashar al Assad, the current president of the Syrian Arab Republic, is the son of the former dictator Hafez al Assad, who reigned with an iron fist for nearly thirty years. Assad the elder came to power following a coup in November 1970 overthrowing his Baath party comrades, in power since March 8, 1963, thanks to his office as minister of defence. He imprisoned his former comrades (considered as the socialistic wing of the Baath party) for periods of around 25 years. Most of them died in detention or shortly after their release

In 1973, Assad had a constitution drawn up which gave him all power. Article B stipulates that “the Baath party is the leading party of the state and society”. The only concession was made in response to the demonstrations of the Muslim Brotherhood who demanded that a stipulation that Islam should be the religion of the president be incorporated in the constitution.

The former dictator drew on the models of the “eastern Europe socialist” countries in 1972 when he created a “Progressive and Nationalist Front” including the pro-Moscow Communist Party and four other small nationalist parties. This “governmental” front had no real power except that of applauding the decisions of the dictator; moreover all the parties of this front, except the Baath, were banned from any political activity among the army and among students. He also drew on the North Korean model in creating “Baath vanguards”, an organisation responsible for indoctrinating children from a very young age, to maintain the cult of the personality of the leader and mass parades in his honour.

The regime of the elder Assad invaded Lebanon in 1976 with the blessing of the United States and the Western countries to crush the Lebanese nationalist movement and the Palestinian resistance.

The following year an armed insurrection was launched by the Muslim Brotherhood. During the armed conflict, the two parties committed the most abominable crimes, but the response of the dictatorship was the more bloodthirsty; it definitively crushed this insurrection with a bloodbath at the massacre of Hama, in early February 1982. Even today we don't know the exact number of victims (between 15,000 and 30,000 dead). This repression was not limited to the Muslim Brotherhood, it extended to all the political forces of the left, who suffered successive waves of arrest until exhaustion set in. Thousands of activists experienced death, torture and imprisonment without trial thanks to the emergency law in force for very long periods, as well as exile. Society was virtually emptied of its live forces. It seemed that the regime had triumphed over society. In the 1980s and 1990s a bloody repression reigned with a total deprivation of liberties, which we call the black years.

Power and economy

The socio-economic policy of Hafez al Assad was initially marked by the heritage of the left wing of the Baath that he had overthrown, that is to say he inherited the nationalisations associated with the most radical agrarian reform in the region; the old dictator maintained a massive corruption of the military and the upper civil service in exchange for unfailing loyalty to his person. The form of pre-existing state capitalism was transferred through corruption into a milch cow for this nomenclature and in particular for the circle around the dictator, his family and his most faithful lieutenants.

Syria thus experienced in the 1970s and 80s an operation of illegal enrichment based on a policy of massive corruption led by the leading group itself. The socio-economic composition of the country has radically changed. We find ourselves then before a significant new "class" of wealthy bourgeois who have become rich only thanks to their function in the state apparatus and their pillage of the public sector and the national wealth.

This new "class", organically linked to the state, needed to invest its wealth in the various sectors of the economy. Decree number 10 of 1991 was the trampoline by which this class was able to "launder" its wealth. It authorises investment in the private sector and opens up import-export, but always under the control of the state, and also perpetuating the system of general corruption. The 1990s decade was that of the emergence of a bourgeois "new class" of new rich, a hybrid class born out of a merger of the bourgeois bureaucracy and the survivors of the old bourgeoisie that we had called the private bourgeoisie.

This was accompanied by a growing impoverishment of the middle and popular layers. From the 1990s onwards, an astronomical cleavage would separate the state elite and this new bourgeoisie from the rest of Syrian society. The police state repressed any independent activity. In 1990 the first organisation in defence of democratic liberties in Syria, the "Committees for the Defence of Democracy Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria", created in December 1989, estimated the number of political detainees in the gaols of the dictatorship at 18,000 persons.

The king is dead, long live the king!

The old dictator Hafez al Assad died on June 10, 2000 (officially declared on June 11). In a session held the same day which lasted half an hour, article 83 of the Constitution was modified, lowering the age required to become president of the republic from 40 to 34 years to adapt exactly to the age of Bashar al Assad. This same day the vice president Abdel Halim Khadam, one of the pillars of the dictatorship and one of its most corrupt members (who became in an "oppositionist" in 2005) published two decrees, one promoting Bashar al Assad to the rank of marshal (he was colonel) and the other naming him supreme head of the armed forces. The circle was closed, in a few hours the

son (a doctor by training) replaced the father in the presidency.

On July 17, the inaugural speech of the new president promised many political, economic and administrative reforms. This climate of possible “change” allowed the emergence of a movement of free political expression among intellectuals in the context of what we call the “Damascus spring”. But this climate of relative freedom was of short duration, because repression returned from February 2001, so that a new lead weight crushed all critical or independent political or intellectual activity. The new president pursued the same policy of repression as his father.

However, on the socio economic level the son far exceeded his father, for he encouraged from the beginning the application of all the neoliberal recipes of the World Bank and IMF. To do this Bashar formed a team schooled in neoliberalism, presided over by Abdalla Aldardari, an irresponsible maniac. After a decade long reign, half the population of 23 million inhabitants live at the poverty threshold and more than a third below. Unemployment is at 20% according to official statistics and at 25% according to independent sources. It affects in particular the young because more than 55% of those under 25 are unemployed, in a young country where those under 30 form 65% of the population. The state has withdrawn from its social role, suppressing the subsidies which supported basic needs – sugar, rice, bread and diesel oil. A new system of private education has been set up at the expense of public instruction which has fallen into ruin; the public health system is impoverished and neglected. The year 2008 was marked by the decision of the government to “free prices and suppress subsidies to the poorest layers”. The share of gross domestic product taken by the new bourgeoisie went from 63.4% to 70% between 2005 and 2007. (According to the pro government newspaper “Annour”, August 19, 2008).

Rise of opposition

This mixture of degradation of the standard of living of the majority of the people with merciless repression could only lead to opposition. The latter became visible from 2006 onwards. In May of that year in Damascus, two demonstrations of hundreds of workers from the public construction company took place with confrontations with the forces of order. The year 2006 saw a strike of taxi drivers in Aleppo and confrontations between the inhabitants of a neighbourhood in Homs and the police, over the demolition of some houses for the benefit of big property developer.

In 2007 there were several confrontations with the police and demonstrations took place like in the Almosrria neighbourhood in Aleppo, Almazra’a in Damascus, and Dimas near Damascus. In 2008 there were demonstrations of workers in the port of Latakia, as well as in Dhabia and Zabadani near Damascus. In 2009 and 2010 again there was unrest.

Despite these signs of growing popular unrest and the dynamic revived by the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, and across the Arab countries. Assad declared in an interview on January 31, 2011 to the “Wall Street Journal” that his regime was spared from this wave of revolution because it “served the interests of the people”, while stressing that “Syria is not like Egypt or Tunisia” In this interview he stated contemptuously that the reforms that he had promised ten years ago would require “generations before being realised”.

A revolution begins

A fortnight later, on February 17, a “banal” event in a country like Syria took place: a young man was assaulted in the street by police, probably for a simple traffic offence, in Alharika, right in the

centre of Damascus. A demonstration of around 3,000 people resulted, the demonstrators shouting for the first time "the Syrian people refuse to be humiliated".

On March 6 the security services arrested around 15 youths in the town of Daraa, near Jordan. These children, influenced by the televised images of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolution, had tagged on the wall of their school the famous slogan "the people want the fall of the regime". They were savagely tortured by the head of security Atef Najib - who is the nephew of the president - their fingernails ripped out; the traces of torture on their bodies were horrible. When their families met this torturer to request the release of their children, this criminal told them, according to their testimony: "forget your children, have other children with your wives, if you are incapable bring your wives to me, I will do the necessary".

On March 15 around thirty courageous youths demonstrated in the mosque of Omayyad in the old city of Damascus, demanding freedom and dignity, with a new slogan "Allah, Syria and freedom only". All were arrested and are still in detention. But it was in the martyr town of Daara that the revolutionary process was unleashed. On March 18, 2011 a peaceful demonstration invaded the streets demanding the liberation of the children, freedom and the lifting of the state of emergency. The response of the security forces was to use firearms against the peaceful demonstrators, leading to hundreds of dead and wounded as well as any number of arrests.

It was the powder keg of the revolution: on March 20 there were again demonstrations and massacres in Daraa, on March 21 also, still demanding freedom and the lifting of the state of emergency, on March 22 demonstrations in Daraa and Nawa, on March 23 again Daraa and the demonstration-repression cycle set in, but from March 25 there were also demonstrations in the poor suburbs of Damascus and the coastal town of Latakia. Each demonstration with its batch of dead, wounded and arrested.

From the end of March the movement of opposition became national. Assad made his first speech since the beginning of the unrest on March 15; he neglected the demands for freedom and democracy of the demonstrations, stating that these demonstrations were nothing other than a western conspiracy against his regime, and he presented no apologies or regret to the victims.

This speech was seen by the Syrian masses as an insult and an affront to their legitimate demands. From this date the revolutionary process spread across the national territory and the number of demonstrators grew visibly. On July 1 the number of demonstrators was estimated at around four million, with around four hundred thousand demonstrating in the town of Hama. The slogan of the demonstrations became that of the other Arab revolutions: "the people want the fall of the regime!"

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