

2011-2015: The Syrian bourgeoisie and the people's revolution

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The Syrian people's revolution is approaching the end of its third year, still confronting the apparatus of death and destruction of the ruling dictatorial regime, in addition to numerous threats and dangers. The popular masses have made huge sacrifices in this period: in addition to over a hundred thousand number of killed, hundreds of thousands are wounded or missing, and around half the population of Syria have become internally displaced persons or refugees in neighbouring countries. [1]

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It is notable that this gloomy picture concerns the areas which are revolutionary - and therefore destroyed - which are the areas where the popular classes, including the working class, live and work. This geographic map corresponds to a large extent with the nature of the social forces which are driving the revolution

The political understanding of the traditional, nationalist and Stalinist left, both before the wave of revolutions which has swept across the region and during it, can be characterised as a mixture of statements saying that the coming - or current - revolution is a national-democratic revolution, and another set of statements speaking of revolutions by stages, meaning that the first stage is a national-democratic revolution, but with a 'socialist horizon' which will arrive one day, in the far future. This is a repetition of debates which used to be current among the leftist forces during the experiences of the revolutions of the twentieth century - as if no lessons whatsoever had been derived from them

These two concepts, which are in fact a single concept, Stalinist in essence and origin, are based on the idea that we possess a national bourgeoisie, or a national capitalism. This demands, according to this Stalinist proposition, that we ally with it in order to reach the sought-after national-democratic stage, so as to build a strong economy, industry, growth, etc. From this intellectual proposition, originally Stalinist, are derived a number of Third-Worldist schools, which accuse a mafioso, comprador or rentier bourgeoisie, in order to distinguish it from a national industrial bourgeoisie which will have a progressive role. Some of them see it as necessary that the 'revolutionary party' should lead a class alliance (popular-national bourgeoisie) during this national-democratic stage. This is in fact a repetition of the demagoguery of which we have seen the miserable effects under the slogan of national liberation, and what were called people's democracies, which were revealed to be in reality pure capitalist dictatorships, or state capitalisms

Our object is not an intellectual contest with the above-mentioned myths, which we oppose, with the

adoption of the concept of permanent revolution, and the idea that all mass revolutions carry within them, in the age of capitalism which dominates the whole world, the dynamism of social revolution, that is, the actuality of socialist revolution in our era. Rather, let us see where in reality this Syrian bourgeoisie is today, this bourgeoisie which is supposed, according to the positions set out above, to be concerned with the 'democratic' revolutions, and what its political and class position actually is.

A strong bourgeoisie in possession and in power

The regime of the Assads, father and son, has succeeded, over four decades, in re-forming a large and strong bourgeois class. But what the dictator Assad the elder did over three decades in this respect is distinguished by its caution and by a slow return of spirit to the large bourgeoisie, via carefully-considered measures and by its organic connection with the ruling power. To do this it used two implements: the Law of Profit no. 10 of 1991, and the establishment of a general regime of corruption and generalised robbery, through which the high state bureaucrats, and especially the ruling clique and its partners, became, by the plunder of property, a large bourgeoisie in real estate, commerce and industry. But Assad the elder conserved to some degree the social role of the state, retaining free health and education systems and subsidies for basic subsistence products for the great majority of the toiling classes; and absorbed part of the unemployment by pumping it into a large state bureaucracy with no rational productive function, especially the army, the security apparatus, and the administrative departments

This caution on the side of preserving some of the social achievements which Assad the elder retained, was cast aside by Bashar al-Assad when he succeeded his father in July 2000. He instituted swift and violent neoliberal changes to the economy, with a shameful disregard for any expected social reactions, in the belief that the repressive apparatuses of power had destroyed, over the decades, any attempt at protest. This was a grave mistake, for social protests did not stop but increased from 2006 onwards

The regime had given its antisocial neoliberal policy, undertaken in the interests of the Syrian large bourgeoisie, the name of the 'social market economy'. The regime of the clique, after Assad the younger inherited the leadership, brought the number of those living below the poverty line from 11 to 33 per cent; if we add to that the number of those living on less than two dollars a day, the number of people living in poverty in Syria in 2009 was almost half of the population, according to UN statistics

This rising bourgeoisie gained possession of 70 per cent of the GDP according to the statistics for 2009, at the time when there was a kind of unwritten agreement between it and the power of the ruling clique, by which the latter said to the rising bourgeois class: 'Get as rich as you like, but leave us in power'. This is what happened over the last four decades. Thus the regime symbolically brought a number of businessmen into the People's Council, which has no practical role. And it increased the powers of the industrial and commercial associations, and even formed businessmen's councils with 69 states in 2009, allowing Syrian businessmen to do business and associate directly with companies and institutions in trade, banking and industry in these countries (it is these same councils which were dissolved in June 2013 as a result of the siege and economic boycott imposed on Syria and the disappearance of their role)

In addition to this, the despotic form of the regime may be regarded as the form corresponding to the rising Syrian bourgeoisie, in that there is no space for protest against its exploitation and plunder, and no legal or trade-unionist obstacles in the path of its greed.

What national bourgeoisie

When the people's revolution broke out in March 2011, it was noteworthy that a section of this Syrian large bourgeoisie expressed its support for the ruling regime by propaganda and proclamations, in that stage in the first months of the revolution when demonstrations of support for the clique were still a pressing need of the regime. Another section continued to finance and arm militias loyal to the regime, especially that part of the bourgeoisie which is a partner to the ruling family clique.

But it is well-known that capital has no homeland and no religion other than its profits: from the end of the first year of the revolution there began a growing movement to smuggle the property of this bourgeoisie to Lebanon and other Arab and foreign states. This began, in the second year, with the closing of its factories and the arbitrary sacking of tens of thousands of workers, or the moving or sale of these factories.

The bourgeoisie did not long hesitate in grasping the danger that the popular revolution posed to it. It immediately began arbitrarily sacking large numbers of workers, in order to prevent them from taking part in strikes in their factories, and to protect their capital in the best conditions for the guarantee of their interests. The semi-official newspaper 'al-Watan' published a report noting the dismissal of over 85,000 workers in the first year of the revolution; half of those dismissed were from Damascus and its surrounding areas. The official figures indicated that 187 firms in the private sector were closed completely in the period from 1/1/2011 to 27/2/2012. The report indicates that these figures were not confirmed: the number of workshops and factories closed was estimated at 500. [2]

The British Financial Times stated that 'Syrian businessmen have quietly moved their property abroad since the start of the crisis in the country. Economists have said that the operation sped up when the violence destroyed the commercial centres in Damascus and Aleppo...' [3]

The researcher Samir 'Abbud estimated the value of what has been withdrawn from deposits in Syrian banks by the depositors (especially the large bourgeois), by the end of 2012, at nearly 100 million Syrian pounds. [4]

But no-one has an exact estimate of the size of the capital smuggled out by the bourgeoisie, including that section which is closely linked to the ruling family clique, and there is no correct estimate of the number of factories which have been moved abroad to be worked or sold, or those damaged or stopped from working

According to statements of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce, 'capital flight from Syria is estimated at 20 million dollars', [5] a figure we believe is much lower than the real one, especially as it was produced at the start of 2013

In reality, the number of private factories which have stopped working in Aleppo alone, a city whose industry forms 36 per cent of Syria's total industry, is more than a thousand, meaning the arbitrary dismissal of more than 500,000 workers. [6]

Nor did the industrial bourgeoisie smuggle most of its factories abroad in the dead of night: many of the factories were transferred outside the country with the agreement of the Syrian authorities themselves, as is demonstrated by the statement of the Egyptian Minister of Industry and Foreign Trade Hatim Salih, at the end of March 2013, that '70 Syrian factories have moved to Egypt', indicating that 'there are 300 more factories waiting to find sites'. [7] Another indication is the decision of the Syrian government to prohibit the export of factories, issued in March 2013, [8] and

the statement of the Syrian economic expert Muhammad Sa'id, that 'around 90 per cent of the industrial establishments were moved abroad with the permission of the state and with the agreement of their owners....' [9]

The Syrian bourgeoisie did not just sell or move the majority of its establishments and factories; it also smuggled out the larger part of its capital. And of even greater importance is that a large part of the bourgeois fled the country themselves to place themselves and their property in security, looking on at the ongoing death and destruction, the price of which was being paid by the poor and the toiling classes, whether they were civilians or fighters with the 'popular resistance', or soldiers in the regime's army. And this at a time when the part of the bourgeois class that remains in the country is flourishing and getting drunk on the war economy, by selling land, building, smuggling, speculation, monopolies, or other profitable activities that wars provide. Some of them can now live exclusively off these activities: those who have been given the name of warlords

We are looking at something like the emigration of a 'class', or of a large part of it, outside the country, while it waits for other classes to wear each other out (among them is that section of the class which holds the reins of political power), in their violent struggle, until things are stabilised in such a way as to allow it to return and dominate once more, in conditions more than suitable for it politically and economically. This is the class which has preserved itself physically and retained all its economic and financial energies

Various sources are in agreement on the estimate that at the start of 2013 the number of 'Syrian businessmen who have gone to Egypt is around 30 per cent of the businessmen who have fled Syria: in number 50,000 investors'. [10]

This is also what is announced, despite some discrepancy in the estimates, by numerous Syrian official statements. Mazen Humur, member of the administrative council of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce, announced that '60 per cent of businessmen left the country at the height of the crisis, causing the economy losses estimated at 20 billion dollars'. [11] At the same time, Muruwwa al-Aytuni, member of the administrative council of the Damascus and Environs Chamber of Industry, announced that '70 per cent of Syrian businessmen have left the country, which is alarming.' [12]

The working class and the common people

The Syrian working class has been exposed to an official deformation of its struggle and trade-union activity since the Ba'th took power, but the regime succeeded in attaching the labour unions to itself - we mean here the top union leadership - in 1974 under the slogan of 'political unionism'. This is the case for the other union and professional organisations like the Peasants' Union or the Students' Union and others

In the first months of the 2011 revolution, the ruling bourgeois power used these 'yellow' trade union structures, in addition to a long tradition of terror and repression, to mobilise large numbers of workers, public employees and teachers in demonstrations in support of Bashar al-Asad. But the regime, out of fear that such demonstrations might turn against it on the one hand, and because it had called out the army to suppress the oppositional popular demonstrations, on the other, stopped using them in demonstrations in its own support - which, we repeat, benefited from the support and financing of many of the Syrian large bourgeoisie

It is well known that the Syrian regime openly hates and fears two basic segments of society, the workers and the students. It inserted into the founding document of the ruling National Progressive Front - which includes, along with the Ba'th Party, some small nationalist parties and the Stalinist

Communists - a paragraph emphasising the obligation these parties are under to refrain from activity in those sectors, in addition to the army

But the deterioration of the living standards of wide sectors of the population led, from 2006 onwards, to a marked increase in workers' and popular protests and demonstrations. Complaints spread even in the ranks of the official trade unions themselves. It was notable, from the beginning of the revolution, that the violence and destruction of the regime affected essentially the areas in which the labouring masses live and work, in the environs of Damascus, Dera'a, Homs, Aleppo and Deir el-Zor. Similarly, the bourgeoisie continually dismissed workers arbitrarily, even in factories not at risk from violence and in areas loyal to the regime

For its part, the regime is laying siege to the surviving workers' establishments with its militias and official apparatus, and trying to get sectors of the workers to endorse its battles, preventing its members from existing or acting as a class with its own distinct interests. Especially with the increasing collapse of the economy and subsistence in the country, which pushes those who still have a job to hold onto it, and those who have lost their jobs to seek work, which is not available in the current economic and political conditions. Some of those who have been made unemployed have been forced either to join the opposition fighting groups, which pay a subsistence allowance to their fighters, or have joined the so-called 'Syrian National Army', a kind of regime militia, not necessarily out of conviction, but as a means of subsistence and an attempt to survive

The general picture of the socio-economic condition of Syria has become more than tragic. The number of unemployed, at the end of the first quarter of 2013, has reached around 2.96 million, which brings the percentage of unemployment to 47.8 [13], while the actual labour force has dwindled to around 3.1 million workers today (2013), whereas it was around 6 million in 2010. This has led to an increase in the number of those working in the unofficial sector of the economy, such as travelling sellers of all kinds of goods, including oil, and smugglers

The living conditions of wide sectors of the workers and popular classes have deteriorated to the point that the Damascus Workers' Union was driven to criticise the current conditions in its annual report for this year (2013), presenting very high figures emphasising the decline taking place in living standards. It indicates, for instance, that the state has coined a huge quantity of money, which has pushed the rate of inflation up to 75 percent, and led to an alarming rise in prices, especially of foodstuffs and oil-derived products. This report states that 'Capital flight has caused the closure of thousands of establishments and factories in Syria, and hence the rise of the unemployment rate to record figures and the appearance of social problems,' emphasising the collapse of the living standard of around 6.1 million people, and a rise of around 100 percent in rents. The 'official' Workers' Union demanded the improvement of the living conditions of the poorest class of the society, the workers, by the increase of their pay by between 30 and 300 percent. [14]

It goes without saying that, from the facts we have given, in addition to the shift of a large part of the revolutionaries into armed combat, the violence of the regime and the savagery of the ongoing battles - all this has made the action of the working class, as a class, in its workplaces, extremely weak - although in 2013 we saw the first strike in medical supplies factories in Damascus on 29 July. But this by no means implies that the workers and toilers form the essential bloc of the revolutionaries of the popular armed movement

Therefore, in these extremely violent conditions of the current class struggle, we see on the one hand the flight abroad of an essential part of the bourgeoisie with all its structures, in order to preserve itself and its property. This surviving part is growing in wealth as a result of the war economy, and even the encouragement of the ruling power to move its factories and establishments into the so-called 'safe areas' on generous terms. On the other hand, we see the emergence of a new

segment of war profiteers and warlords, especially in the 'liberated areas'. This is a new bourgeois segment, no less corrupt than its peers

What is the political position of the Syrian bourgeoisie

The new war bourgeoisie has an interest in prolonging the struggle for an additional period, provided that this gave them the possibility to put the wealth they have plundered back into circulation. We find some of their representatives in a number of the political organisations of the opposition, especially the Syrian National Council and the Coalition of the Forces of the Revolution and the Opposition. But it is not opposed either to working with the regime itself: some of them are among those who have taken possession of oil wells and are selling their products to the regime which they claim to be fighting, as well as smuggling part of these products to Turkey. In fact, the Syrian bourgeoisie, in its essential part, continues to see the regime as 'its regime', and does not welcome any political step that expresses a position resisting it, or distinguishing itself (the bourgeoisie) from it (the regime). We may say that the initiatives of Mu'adh al-Khatib, former president of the National Coalition, expressed the position of the Damascus bourgeoisie only, and was based on the opening of dialogue and negotiations with the regime, without conditions. But the sole political initiative of the 'Syrian bourgeoisie' came two years after the revolution following a meeting of some Syrian businessmen in Amman, Jordan, in late March 2013. They launched what they called the 'Syrian Conscience Initiative', which guaranteed that al-Asad would stay (in power) until 2014 and that the current government would be retained, with the exception of the Ministers of Defence and the Interior only. It was clear that none of the revolutionaries were interested in this sole bourgeois initiative; rather, it was a miserable attempt to save the dictatorial bourgeois regime. [15] Meanwhile, the middle strata scarcely have an existence any more - it was they who suffered most in the last ten years from a state of continual dwindling. The condition of impoverishment has reduced these middle strata to the condition of the popular classes, poor or miserably poor

Whatever happens to the political conditions in Syria in the coming period and their fluctuations, and whatever is the fate of the revolution, socio-economic demands will impose themselves at the core of any future political project. Specifically, it will become clearer that they have a place - alongside the desire to sweep away despotism and claim democratic freedoms - among the basic motives of the ongoing struggles and revolutionary dynamisms of all the labourers to achieve their demands

This gives an in-depth picture of the socio-economic changes under way in Syria, which are increasing in gravity and disintegration. The regime has used this fact, in addition to the policies of destruction and of inducing people to emigrate, in order to push wide sectors of the broad revolutionary masses to a state of despair and gasping for survival, fleeing from killing, destruction, hunger and deprivation. The regime hopes thereby to expel or paralyse the masses from revolutionary action and protest, and has in fact been relatively successful, because the 'liberated areas' suffer from the same problems as they did under dictatorial rule. Add to that the growth of the jihadist and takfiri forces, reactionary and opposed to the revolution, which are attempting, in addition to what is mentioned above, to impose a model of backward social relations, offer a reactionary vision which reveals an understanding of the Islamic religion submerged in its backwardness, narrow-mindedness, and narrow horizons, and announce their desire to impose a Caliphate, which is in clear contradiction with the reasons and aims of the great Syrian people's revolution. This makes these reactionary, fascist forces a dangerous obstacle in the way of the continuance of the popular movement and the victory of the revolution. These reactionary forces have come at present to constitute a black danger for the future of the revolution and of the country.

At this point of the revolution, for the sake of its victory, there can be no escape for the popular movement and the armed popular revolutionary resistance, from accepting their responsibilities and confronting these reactionary forces with determination, with arms if necessary, and without hesitation, while continuing the popular revolution against the regime of the ruling clique at the same time. This may permit the popular revolution to return to its original course, for the sake of freedom, democracy, equality, and social justice

This requires, of necessity, the collaboration of the responsible forces to lay down a strategy for the victory of the Syrian popular revolution, the revolution of freedom, dignity, and social justice. This requires, in our opinion, urgent efforts to establish a mass revolutionary leadership, making use of forms of popular self-organisation, in various parts of the Syrian land outside the domination of the regime, as opposed to the existing emaciated forms, besides bringing to maturity the emergence of a unified political and military leadership for the armed popular resistance, putting an end to its fragmentation, laying siege to the fascist takfiri groups and their isolation from the mass movement, as a step towards ending the dangerous, destructive and murderous role they have been playing. As for the revolutionary left, the building of the mass revolutionary socialist workers' party remains an urgent task, and a matter of life and death, in the current stage of the violent class struggle, and in the days to come

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P.S.

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* Translated by Peter Hill, June 2014.

Footnotes

[1] See the statistics in our article, Ghayath Naisse, 'An ongoing revolution,' al-Manshur, 23 July 2011, on the website al-hiwar al-mutamaddin, and other articles and statistics available on the same site.

[2] From the website 'Inab Baladi, 'Unemployment in Syria, where is it leading?,' 4/4/2012, <http://enabbaladi.org/archives/607>

[3] From the website of The Times newspaper, 10/2/2013.

[4] Sami Abbud, 'Syrian wealth which has fled abroad has adopted masks which make it hard to return it', The Economist website, 13/5/2013.

[5] Sham Bars website, 12/2/2013.

[6] Basil Duyub, 'Thus fell the citadel of Syrian industry,' al-Akhbar (Lebanon), no. 1935, 19/2/2013.

[7] Salam al-Sa'di, 'Syria's factories are leaving too,' al-Mudun website, 4/4/2013.

[8] Ibid

[9] Baladuna website, 'Syrian industry is sick, not dying,' 4/6/2013.

[10] Sky News website, 'Syrian refugees who are businessmen,' 30/1/2013.

[11] Sham Bars, 'Damascus Chamber of Commerce: capital flight from Syria is estimated at 20 billion dollars,' 14/2/2013.

[12] 'Inab Baladi website, citing the Financial Times, 'One group's poison is another group's meat... The flight of Syrian capital,' 31/3/2013.

[13] Sham Bars website, 'To fight in Syria... an economic decision for the unemployed,' 20 July 2013; the figures cited in this article are from a study by the Syrian Centre for Policy Research, published this year (2013).

[14] Website of the official newspaper 'al-Thawra', 'Damascus Workers' Union: Provide a safe working environment...', 17/7/2013.

[15] See the website of the Syrian Media Centre and its report published 18/4/2013, which includes the names of a number of businessmen who organised this initiative: 'Uns al-Kazbari, Ratib al-Shalah, Muwaffiq Qadah, Adil Mardini, Zina Yaziji, Adib al-Fadil, Abdallah al-Dardari, and a businessman indebted to the revolution.'