



As millions take to streets...Victory to the Syrian revolution!

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The growing revolution in Syria unites a diverse population hungry for democratic and social rights, argues Marcus Halaby.

Much as in Libya, where imperialist intervention, and the Gaddafi regime's faded "anti-imperialist" credentials, have persuaded some leftists to support the regime against its own people, the recent events in Syria have seen many ostensible socialists indifferent or even opposed to a popular uprising for elementary democratic rights. Like parts of the Arab nationalist-influenced Arab left, they have preferred the illusion of an alliance with a bourgeois dictatorship backed by Iran, as a supposed bastion of "resistance", to the reality of a living, breathing revolution.

This has apparently extended to Azmi Bishara, the exiled Palestinian former member of the Israeli Knesset, whose friendliness towards the Ba'ath regime of Bashar al-Assad stands in sharp contrast to his vocal support for the revolutions in Egypt and elsewhere.

Nor has the mainstream media coverage in the West been any better. Focusing on, and exaggerating, the country's religious divisions, they have tended to give the impression that what is at stake is a struggle between the country's Sunni Muslim majority and a ruling Alawi minority. Whether their authors realise it or not, these reports are doing the regime's own work for it.

Syrian opposition activists have even had to denounce news agency Reuters for stoking sectarianism, by referring to Baniyas and Daraa as "Sunni areas", after the regime's forces killed mourners there. Al Jazeera's English-language channel, whose own correspondents should know better, has broadcast reports referring to the ruling Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party as being "almost exclusively Alawi".

In fact, the protests have drawn in Syrians from all of Syria's sects and regions ? very much including the Alawi minority. They have, however, remained small in Syria's two largest cities, Damascus and Aleppo, where the regime still possesses a passive base of support, and where it has been able to stage pro-regime rallies by subjecting school and university students and state employees to varying degrees of coercion.

Similarly, Syrian Druze living in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights have demonstrated in support of the regime, although these have been followed by smaller pro-democracy protests. The regime's own base is therefore not at all confined to the Alawi minority. Nor could it be, without ensuring the regime's downfall.

The first serious protests began in Daraa, in a deprived agricultural region on the border with Jordan in the south. The regime's immediate and predictable response was to blame agitation by the banned Sunni-Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, which was once the main party in opposition to the Ba'ath, until it was crushed during an abortive uprising in Hama in 1982, with the deaths of up to 40,000 people.

There has however been no evidence of the Brotherhood's organised involvement in the protests, which have in any case since spread to all of Syria's provincial cities.

In Hasakah and Qamishli in the north-east, close to the borders with Turkey and Iraq, the regime has traditionally stoked tensions between the Kurdish and Arab Christian minorities. Large-scale protests there have forced the regime to rescind a 1962 law (enacted by a previous government and kept in place by the Ba'ath) which deprived up to 200,000 Syrian Kurds of formal citizenship. Christians, however, have marched alongside Kurds in these protests, with chants of "No Kurd, no Arab, the Syrian people are one" and "We salute the martyrs of Daraa".

Desperate

Finally, in Latakia, a mixed Sunni-Alawi-Christian coastal city in the Alawis' rural heartland in the north-west, the regime has reportedly encouraged Alawis from the surrounding villages to attack protesters in the city, portraying the opposition as Sunni-sectarian Islamists bent on a massacre of Alawis.

In order to do so, it has even taken to blaming Palestinians from the nearby refugee camp of being involved in "armed gangs" that have roamed the city to stoke sectarian tensions, a charge explicitly denied by the regime's Palestine protégé, Ahmed Jibril of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine ? General Command.

The protesters themselves, however, have included Alawis from the city, and have explicitly raised anti-sectarian slogans, as well as anti-regime and pro-democracy slogans.

Exploiting sectarianism

In fact, sect does play a role in Syrian politics, but not in the way normally attributed to it. Rather like Tito's Yugoslavia, where open manifestations of "nationalism" were ruthlessly suppressed, the Ba'ath regime has routinely laid the charge of "sectarian incitement" at all opponents, regardless of sect or ideological affiliation. These have included Michel Kilo (a liberal Christian journalist from Latakia) and Riyad al-Turk (a Kurdish ?Sunni Muslim? from Homs, and former leader of the banned anti-regime wing of the Syrian Communist Party), as well as Muslim Brotherhood activists.

In doing so, the regime is able to exploit real concerns that exist amongst all Syrians. Three-quarters of Syria's population are Sunni Muslim ? of whom about one seventh are Kurdish ? while the remaining one-quarter comprises Christians and heterodox Muslim minorities ? Alawis, Druze and Ismailis.

During the colonial period ? when Syria and Lebanon were placed under a French Mandate ? the French authorities tried to divide the country along sectarian lines, creating a "Druze state" around Suwayda in the south, an "Alawi state" around Latakia in the north-west, and separating Damascus from Aleppo in order to encourage their traditional rivalry.

This experiment proved near-universally unpopular, and the French were forced to abandon it after popular protests for Syrian unity and independence. The only result of this experiment in sectarianism to survive the colonial period was Lebanon, whose creation as a state "for" the Christian Maronite minority has ensured for it decades of political paralysis, punctuated by periods of civil war. The fate of Lebanon, and the existence of a Zionist ?Jewish state? to the south, has acted as a stark warning about the results of sectarianism.

Moreover, the oligarchy that dominated Syria's pre- and post-independence politics prior to the Ba'ath comprised an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim landlord class, as well as a merchant class that contained a part of the Christian minority.

On the other hand, Syria's peasantry was disproportionately (although not in its majority) drawn from the Druze and Alawi minorities, while the rising middle class of teachers, doctors, engineers and other university-educated professionals was disproportionately (but again, not mainly or exclusively) composed of poorer Christians.

Lies

Sectarianism ? directed at Druze and Alawis in particular ? was the stock-in-trade of Syria's oligarchy against the rising demands for land reform, workers' rights and the expansion of education. The (partly Kurdish) Syrian dictator Adib Shishakli was even assassinated by a Druze in exile in Brazil in 1964, in revenge for his massacre of Druze protesters who brought about his overthrow ten years earlier.

Anti-sectarianism in Syria therefore has a class dimension, as well as a national dimension. It not only represents the fear of the majority Sunni "community" at the potential for the country's fragmentation, but also the desire of Syria's minorities for the maintenance of their post-independence social gains. The problem for the Ba'ath regime is that its ability to pose as the only available defender of both is wearing increasingly thin.

The Alawis, as a formerly marginalised community with roots in the poor peasantry, were among the biggest beneficiaries of the land reforms initiated by the Ba'ath regime ? not as a sect, but as a class.

This occurred mainly during the Ba'ath's "leftist" phase under Salah Jadid (himself an Alawi) from 1966, until his overthrow by Hafez al-Assad (also an Alawi) in a coup by the rightist "Corrective Movement" faction of the Ba'ath in 1970.

Drawn into the military as one of the few available avenues for social advancement, individual Alawis were well placed to take part in the military intrigues that characterized Syrian politics

It should therefore hardly be surprising that Alawis have been both visible and "over-represented" in the Ba'ath. All of Syria's minorities have been "over-represented" in all of Syria's radical parties ? the Communists, the Ba'ath and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP).

The real problem has not been Alawi "over-representation", but the fact that the regime's character as a military dictatorship has led, inevitably, to the creation of cliques based on ties of kinship and patronage. This solidified under Hafez al-Assad in the 1970s, when Assad tried to rebuild bridges to the formerly hostile Sunni Muslim bourgeoisie, by allowing an "infithah" ("opening-up") of the economy to private capital, while maintaining the existence of a massive state and military sector through an alliance with the Soviet Union.

Parallel to this, he also allowed the expansion of corruption and patronage as a form of social control. In this way, he could both allow the regime's lower and middle ranking figures to acquire semi-licit personal empires ? in exchange for their loyalty ? and have ammunition available against them in the event that he needed to play them off against each other.

This was not without consequences ? albeit semi-concealed ones ? for inter-communal relations. The charge laid at the regime that it represents "sectarian Alawite rule" ? most commonly articulated by the Muslim Brotherhood ? speaks mainly to the resentment of a part of the conservative petty bourgeoisie at having to share the sources of graft that were previously their own by right, as well as that part of the bourgeoisie that remained un-reconciled to having to share power with plebeian upstarts from the military. The Druze in particular have derived less benefit from this "democratization" of official corruption than have others.

Hafez al-Assad's "correction" ? in the name of nationalist pragmatism ? of the Salah Jadid regime's "leftist excesses" has created the Syria of today. The key moments in this process were: his abandonment of the Palestinians in Jordan in "Black September" in 1970; his waging of war on Israel in October 1973 ? in alliance with Egypt's conservative post-Nasser leader Anwar Sadat; his intervention in the Lebanese civil war in June 1976 ? in support of the Christian right wing, and against Syria's traditional Lebanese leftist and Palestinian allies; and his crushing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama in 1982.

The collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in a period of uncertainty, forcing Syria to try to avoid isolation by supporting the US-led war to eject Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1991. Syria's role in policing the post-civil war Taif Agreement in Lebanon, its role in supporting Hezbollah, its opposition to the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo Accords and its sponsorship of anti-Oslo Palestinian factions, have all given it useful bargaining chips in its dealings with the imperialist powers, as well as allowing it to preserve its "anti-imperialist" credentials in the Arab world.

Conversely, the wave of privatisations (and their attendant corruption) that began after the disappearance of Soviet support in the 1990s, their acceleration following Hafez al-Assad's death and his son Bashar's succession in 2000, the failure of the "political reforms" promised by Bashar al-Assad in his early years in power, the regime's ejection from

Lebanon following the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafic Hariri in 2005, and its opposition to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, have in various ways increased its internal and external isolation.

Just another dictatorship

With its repression, its shifts towards neo-liberalism, its failure to liberate the Golan Heights (occupied by Israel since 1967), its rampant corruption and its occasional friendly overtures to imperialism, the Syrian Ba'ath regime now looks increasingly like just another Arab dictatorship. Even while it continues to trade on its anti-Israeli rhetoric, its support for the Lebanese and Palestinian resistance, and its alliance with a rising Iranian power that is now the major obstacle to unalloyed US hegemony, the causes of the uprising against it are no different to those elsewhere in the region: the complete absence of democracy or free speech, the alienation and frustrated social ambitions of the younger generation, and deepening social inequality, exacerbated by the global economic crisis.

Revolutionary socialists should not allow themselves to be swayed for a moment by the notion that the purportedly 'anti-imperialist' Arab regimes are any exception to the revolution now sweeping the Arab world. But nor should they allow the Syrian Ba'ath regime to re-establish its legitimacy, by presenting its difficulties as the result of a mere sectarian struggle.

Only a revolution of the Syrian workers and peasants can resolve the tasks of democracy in Syria ? and in doing so, all of Syria's communities will have a legitimate role.

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