

Afflicted Arabia: Domestic Factors in Syria that Are Impeding Revolution

Six years ago, walking through Damascus and seeing propagandized images of Bashar Al-Assad and his father Hafiz on city walls and windows, I joked with my brother that Assad Family lunchboxes were probably sold in gift shops. Such blatant showings of authoritarianism were incomprehensible, almost funny from my perspective. As a young American visiting family, one person wielding so much power indiscriminately was not real to me.

The past tense is important: the idea *was* not real. I now understand it as frighteningly concrete. In March of 2011, Assad's flagrancy went from a comical reflection of corruption to a serious symbol of power. Fifteen months later, the Syrian conflict has killed nearly 15,000 (Syrian Martyr Database). While some governments have experienced collapse or reform, Assad's authoritarianism has endured the Arab Spring.

Politicians and journalists have made countless claims as to why Syria is not Egypt. The obvious distinctions between the two are external, perhaps most important being the international community's response (or lack thereof). But there are several internal factors about Syria that have made (and will continue to make) the process of revolution especially painful.

The perhaps most obvious source of Assad's power is the continued strength of the Syrian Armed Forces. As one of the last Arab states to be ruled by a minority sect, the regime's decades of placing Alawites in almost all government and military offices has kept most high-ranks loyal (Landis 2012). To compare to Egypt where military leaders were at the forefront of the revolution, the disadvantage is clear.

And if there are Alawites considering opposition in spite of shared heritage with the regime, they probably do not want to risk status or safety. The situation of other Arab minorities— including Lebanese Maronite Christians and the Iraqi Sunni Muslims who have been pushed to the margins of their societies – could be foreshadowing of their own fate under majoritarian rule (Nerguizian 2012). From the perspective of the 70-percent Sunni population that has been oppressed by the 12-percent Alawites for decades, lustration would not be unwarranted: almost every Alawis family has a member in the government, and 70-percent of career-military personnel belong to the sect (Landis).

It may seem counterintuitive that heterogeneity has stabilized the regime, but Posner's theory that cultural divisions become salient when they can be politically mobilized seems to apply (2004). The government has formed a coalition of minority groups based on mutual fear of the possibility of a Sunni government. While not all Druze, Kurds, and Christians are waving pro-Assad banners, there are not majorities challenging the regime (Kennedy 2012, Zavis 2012, Landis).

Assad also succeeded in obviating demands for regime change within the non-Alawis population through support of the Syrian business class (Landis). Indeed, the regime's strongest supporters are urban Christians, Sunnis, and Alawis whose financial interests are government-protected. After decades of socialism, economic reforms have heavily favored this small group. As it was theorized in the reforming of post-communist states, those who are economically benefited during the transitional stage resist change that might produce a full-fledged middle-class and democratic demands (Hellman 1998).

While revolutions are often supported by disadvantaged masses, in the case of Syria, income equality is skewed enough to make mobilization particularly challenging. As an indication of substantial socioeconomic disparity, Syria has a larger GINI-coefficient (37.4) than its counterpart Egypt (32.1) (Carnegie Endowment). Limited resources impede collective action, especially among the youth who experience poverty and unemployment at higher levels than most of Arabia (Amos 2010). The exception to the general disorganization is one of great controversy: the Muslim Brotherhood's presence among the opposition has produced anxieties regarding what an alternative regime might bring.

But beyond the economic and organizational deterrents, the perhaps most terrifying reason to not oppose Assad's regime exists in Syrian history. In 1982, Hafiz Al-Assad crushed a Sunni uprising in Hama, killing over 20,000. The fact that he retained power in spite of committing such massacre could be indicative of resistance to his son's rule being similarly futile. So while large numbers of Syrians might want regime change, doubt regarding the prospects for success makes throwing oneself on the bandwagon difficult if the masses are hesitant (Kuran 1992).

But revolutionary success being a challenge and it being an impossibility are two very different things. The entire character of the Arab Spring seems to have proven a point that Kuran made after the collapse of the Soviet Union twenty years ago: regime change might be unpredictable, but never random.

Assad's day is long overdue. For the sake of the Syrian people and the demise of authoritarian rule, may it come soon.

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