

Contextualizing the Syrian Uprising

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Syria Studies

An open-access, peer reviewed, & indexed journal.
Published online by the
Centre for Syrian Studies (CSS),
University of St Andrews.

Edited by Raymond Hinnebusch (Editor-In-Chief),
& Omar Imady (Managing Editor).

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Published by the University of St Andrews, Centre for Syrian Studies,
School of International Relations
Fife, Scotland
UK

ISSN: (in process)

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Preface:

Contextualizing the Syrian Uprising

Raymond Hinnebusch

The theme of this issue of *Syria Studies* is “contextualizing the Syrian Uprising.” Two papers, one macro, the other micro, provide quite different and complementary insights into the causes of the Uprising. Students of Syria are like the blind man and the elephant: not only are they “blind” when it comes to penetrating an especially opaque political system, but they tend each, as a result, to hit on one aspect of the many sided regime that has governed Syria since 1963. Michael Dostal’s macro level analysis puts the Syrian uprising in a broad theoretical and historical context delineating five separate layers, which, as they are combined, provide cumulatively more adequate understandings of the tangent of the regime from its early formation in the 1960s to the Syrian Uprising. The formation of the Ba’th regime had three distinguishable aspects. The main aspect in the first decade of Ba’th rule was the populist character by which a regime emerging from the overthrow of the old landed oligarchy sought to survive by mobilizing a popular constituency through, notably, land reform and nationalizations. However, the regime was only consolidated by Hafiz al-Asad’s deployment of several additional aspects of the regime, the sectarian factor and rent. He constructed a neo-patrimonial regime, combining Alawi sectarian solidarity and control of the security apparatus with rent funded clientalism by which formerly hostile Sunni bourgeois elements were co-opted; and thereby forged a new cross-sectarian “state class,”

with a stake in the regime. Two international factors also left an enduring mark on Syria. Dostal cites the neo-Gramscian paradigm, which examines the interaction between international and domestic political-economies, to explore the impact of the global hegemony of neo-liberalism on social forces and public policy in Syria under Bashar al-Asad: the results were similar to those experienced across the Middle East, chiefly the rise of class inequality and crony capitalism. Finally, within the geopolitics paradigm, Syria, by virtue of its pivotal position and fierce independence, has always been an object of external ambitions and became, with the Uprising, the battleground of a new “Struggle for the Middle East” between rival states.

If Dostal focuses on macro-structure, Omar Imady shifts the focus to micro-level agency. His article has important implications for a key root of the Uprising. The Uprising originated in the rural periphery and only later spread to the cities and without, therefore, the disaffection of the rural population, the regime’s initial constituency, there would, arguably, either have been no uprising or it would have been readily contained, as was the Muslim Brotherhood insurgency of 1976-82. The regime’s loss of its rural constituency resulted from a convergence of several factors, including neo-liberal reductions in subsidies for agricultural inputs and fuel for agricultural machinery and removals of protections for agricultural tenants (acquired under the agrarian relations law); and the devastating drought that ravaged large parts of the northeast, inducing a flight to the urban banlieues that became areas of concentrated disaffection. But just as important, was an explosion in the agrarian population on relatively fixed land resources. Tellingly, while the fertility rate in the cities was 2 children/family in the rural East it was 6 per family, putting unbearable pressure on a fragile ecology. This also meant that the many sons of the former generation of peasants who has been incorporated by land reform and cooperatives into the regime base during the 1960-70s were left adrift, without land

or livelihood and forced to enter a saturated non-agricultural labour market. Imady shows how their needs could have been addressed by encouraging self-help initiatives that could have given them a stake in the status quo. He shows how a prototype micro-finance scheme was very successful, yet, for just that reason, was seen as threatening by some elements of the regime. He suggests that the failure of the rural credit initiative, far from accidental, was built into the regime's governing practices, notably its almost pathological fear of any independent initiative it did not control, the rivalries and jealousies of the bureaucracy, and the corrupt practices, inherent in neo-patrimonialism, that partly motivated actors to assert their control over every activity. Bashar al-Asad's bid to move toward a market economy required these pathologies be combatted, but it is appears that there was no qualitative difference from his father's statist era in this respect; hence his "economic reform" produced many negative side effects, notably the discarding of the populist social contract, without unleashing the initiative and entrepreneurship that would have been needed to make it a success.