

New Syria Looks, Acts Like Old Syria

By Ronald Bruce St John | June 20, 2005

The recently concluded Tenth Regional Congress of the Syrian Baath Party marks a watershed in the presidency of Bashar al-Asad. When faced with a make-or-break opportunity to promote desperately needed socio-economic and political reforms, he focused instead on consolidating his own power within the sclerotic Baath Party. This could prove his last chance to contain mounting internal and external pressures for meaningful reform in Syria.

United But Isolated

From the outset, it was clear the Baath Party Congress was not about change. On the contrary, it was about presenting a united front to the Syrian people. In his opening remarks, President Asad set the tone for coming months and years. He described the Baath Party as a “popular force, central to Syrian life” which “remains a vanguard force” in the life of Syria and its people. Warming to the cause, he argued the party was a “paramount national necessity upon which depends the development of all aspects of politics,” describing it as “a civilizing mission before it is a party.”

Rhetoric aside, the president’s opening remarks portrayed a leader largely isolated from socio-economic and political reality. In a country crying out for extensive and serious domestic reform, he suggested significant financial and monetary reforms were already in place with the legislation necessary to accelerate economic and social development already on the books. “What makes us optimistic about the next stage,” he said, “is that a major and important part of the necessary legislation has been passed, which lays a wide base on which to build after we improve procedures and overcome internal constraints.” Nothing could be further from the truth.

Limited Economic Reform

The Syrian government has implemented modest economic reforms in recent years, but economists agree the economy remains a moderate growth environment in need of significant structural reform. The rate of economic growth in recent years has barely kept pace with the rate of population growth, widening the output gap. A relatively low private investment to gross domestic product (GDP) ratio, lagging both developing country and world averages, highlights the lack of confidence in regime economic policies necessary to achieve desired internal and external investment. Syria desperately needs to renovate its legal and fiscal environment, amend restrictive laws and regulations, and reform the banking sector.

In response to these needs, the Baath Party Congress called for creation of a “social market” economy. But it gave little indication as to what it meant by this apparent oxymoron, reminiscent of China or Vietnam. Syrian television later reported specific economic steps discussed during the congress included reducing unemployment, estimated to be around 20 percent, fighting corruption, modernizing the public sector, and eliminating obstacles to investment.

Confusing Social Reform

In his opening address, President Asad appeared at times to reject many of the values with which he was previously associated. Before he assumed the presidency, for example, he served as president of the Syrian Computer Society, an organization devoted to promoting the diffusion of information technology throughout the country. His role here had previously been cited on occasion to indicate his interest in modernization.

Therefore, it shocked observers when the president, in his opening remarks, portrayed information technology in general, and the internet in particular, as a threat to Arab culture and society. In the context of recent regional and world events, he said:

“a huge influx of information and ideas made possible by the communications and IT revolution...has made room for theories and projects, as well as lifestyles which have overwhelmed Arabs and threatened their existence and cultural identity, and has increased the doubts and skepticism in the mind of young Arabs. The forces behind these events have created an illusory virtual reality...which drives us in a direction identified by others.... This leads in the end to the cultural, political and moral collapse of the Arab individual and his ultimate defeat even without a fight.”

For Bashar al-Asad, a trained ophthalmologist who continued his postgraduate education and specialization in the United Kingdom, to dismiss the challenges and opportunities of information technology so lightly was surprising to say the least.

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On a more positive note, the Party congress called for greater press freedom, recommending formation of a higher council for media. This could prove a promising initiative in a country where government control over the media is absolute. The congress also stressed the importance of Syrian women in decision-making, asking the government to develop a comprehensive program together with a timetable for implementation. This recommendation dovetailed nicely with a late-May call by Syrian first lady Asma Asad for creation of a modern educational curriculum to broaden opportunities and to reduce the gender gap. Acknowledging another long-standing issue, the congress recommended the extension of citizenship to thousands of stateless Kurds living in Syria.

The Party congress also called for a narrowing of the emergency laws first decreed in December 1962 and reissued by the Baathist regime when it seized power in March 1963. Broadened over time, the emergency laws give extraordinary powers to the government. Calling for less interference in people's daily lives, the Party called for the emergency laws in the future to be restricted to cases of "state security," still a pretty inclusive category in a tightly controlled country like Syria.

Cosmetic Political Reform

The Baath Party also opened the door a crack to increased political participation in the form of opposition political parties, suggesting it would be "more open to national forces." At the same time, it made clear it would not endorse political parties based on sectarian, ethnic, or religious grounds, closing the door to Kurdish separatist and Muslim fundamentalist movements.

Immediately prior to the opening of the congress, the Syrian government had cracked down on the Jamal Atasi Forum for Democratic Dialogue in Syria, the only tolerated independent political forum left in the country, after participants in the Forum were read a letter from the exiled head of the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. When the Forum members were later released, they confirmed the government intended their arrest to send a message that cooperation with the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood remained forbidden and punishable. Consequently, it was not surprising that the Baath Party Congress refused to recommend lifting the long time ban on membership in the Muslim Brotherhood, a capital offense in Syria for decades.

Fearful change would undermine the authority of the Party, the congress also failed to recommend a change in

Article 8 of the Syrian constitution which enshrines the Baath as "the leader of society." On the contrary, President Asad moved to strengthen his position within the Party, packing the newly-elected Baath Party ruling council with his supporters. In moving to consolidate his power, the president appeared to be attempting to stiffen domestic resolve against growing external pressure, especially from Israel and the United States. In the process, he hoped to demonstrate the regime was not about to collapse.

Whether or not replacing the old guard Baath Party leadership with new, younger faces is a precursor to change in Syrian domestic or foreign policy is another matter. While this remains an intriguing possibility, nothing at the congress foreshadowed this eventuality. That said, a major difficulty is assessing the results of the meeting is that the congress itself does not have the power to change laws but issues recommendations which then have to be passed by the legislature. This can be a lengthy process, and Party recommendations and the resulting new laws are often not identical.

External Reaction

The end of the Baath Party Congress on June 9th coincided with renewed and intensified international scrutiny of Syrian foreign and domestic policy. Following reports of a continued Syrian presence in Lebanon, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan announced plans to send a new team to Lebanon to verify Syrian forces had totally withdrawn in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1559.

One day later, the Bush administration claimed to have "credible information" that Syrian operatives in Lebanon planned to kill senior Lebanese political leaders. Coming only a week after the assassination in Beirut of prominent anti-Syrian journalist Samir Kassir, the White House charges were immediately endorsed by Walid Jumblatt and other Lebanese opposition politicians.

Great Leap Backward

Reviewing the proceedings of the Tenth Regional Congress of the Syrian Baath Party, it would appear the powerful and privileged in Syria thought a discussion of reform could take the place of implementing reform. Despite a few cosmetic adjustments, the congress was about the status quo, not change. Prior to the opening of the Baath Party Congress, President Bashar al-Asad portrayed the upcoming meeting as a "great leap forward." If so, Syria appears to be moving backwards toward the future.

Foregoing a promised focus on internal problems, he chose instead to present a vision of Syria as the Arab heartland, struggling to maintain its identity in the face of strong external pressure. While the congress took steps that Baath Party members considered to be far-reaching, they were not enough for many other Syrians or the outside world. Both the Baath Party and the Syrian state are riddled with incompetence and corruption. If the Asad regime cannot or will not initiate a meaningful reform process, it will likely prove the greatest threat to itself.

Ronald Bruce St John, an analyst for Foreign Policy in Focus (www.fpif.org), has published widely on foreign policy issues. Author of Libya and the United States: Two Centuries of Strife (Penn Press, 2002), his latest book, Revolution, Reform and Regionalism in Southeast Asia: Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, will be published by Routledge in October 2005.

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