

A Watershed for President Asad

By Ronald Bruce St John | June 2, 2005

In the run-up to the June 6 Baath Party Congress, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad is torn by competing forces. In the wake of the hasty removal of Syrian forces from Lebanon, hard-liners are pushing for a reassertion of party control. Reformers see the moment as ripe to accelerate socio-economic and political change. The end result may well set the stage for Syrian politics for years to come.

Socioeconomic Reform

Even though the final agenda for the congress remains under discussion, endorsement of additional free-market reforms for Syria's state-run economy is one likely outcome. Implementation would be a relatively easy—and popular—move, as Syrians are tired of being poor.

Syrian first lady Asma Asad recently signaled that related socioeconomic reforms are under consideration. Addressing a late-May conference in Damascus organized by Women in Business International, a nonprofit organization that encourages networking among businesswomen, she called for greater institutional transparency, arguing any increase in foreign investment would necessitate more accountable institutions and more open procedures. She also called for the creation of a modern educational curriculum to broaden opportunities and to reduce the gender gap.

Her remarks, a potential harbinger for the upcoming party congress, carry additional weight in that Syria's first lady has practical knowledge of the business world. Born and raised in London, she worked as an economist for Deutsche Bank and dealt with mergers and acquisitions at JP Morgan before her marriage to Bashar al-Asad.

Political Reform

Necessary political reforms will likely prove more difficult to address. President Asad is reportedly considering a change in the Syrian constitution that would remove a reference to the Baath Party as “the

leader of society.” Old-school Baathists argue this would undermine the authority of the party, while reformers hope the president will go further and actually resign from the party. Asad may seek some change in the document's phraseology, but he is unlikely to go too far in undermining the authority of the party.

In addition, the Baathists may also announce new rules concerning the formation of opposition political parties as long as they have a “national platform,” code words for being nonsectarian. President Asad and much of the ruling elite belong to a small Shiite Muslim sect known as Alawis. Religious parties are a reminder of bloody battles in the late 1970s and early 1980s when Bashar al-Asad's father, Hafiz al-Asad, faced mounting Muslim activist opposition. Eventually, Hafiz al-Asad brutally crushed the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood in a February 1982 uprising of Sunni Muslims in Hama. While Alawi-Sunni tensions are slowly easing (both Bashar and his brother Maher married Sunni women), recent events in neighboring Lebanon and Iraq highlight the potential threat sectarian politics pose for the stability of the regime.

Another highly symbolic issue for the Baath Party Congress is the emergency law that has kept Syria in a permanent state of martial law for more than four decades. First decreed in December 1962, the Baathist regime reissued the state of emergency when it seized power in March 1963, and the law has been broadened since that time. The state of emergency gives extraordinary powers to the government, which

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may restrict freedom of movement and assembly; censor letters, publications, and broadcasts; seize property; and close media offices. President Asad could decide to abolish the law entirely or restrict it to real breaches in national security.

Political Opposition

The May 24 crackdown on the Jamal Atasi Forum for Democratic Dialogue in Syria, the only tolerated independent political forum left in the country, added confusion to the prospects for real political change. This was the only political group to survive the 2001 crackdown on political dissent that ended the so-called “Damascus spring.”

Albeit principally a secular grouping, suppression of the Atasi Forum reflected regime concern with the growing influence of revived Islamist currents. Recently, participants in the Forum were read a letter from the exiled head of the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Membership in the Muslim Brotherhood has been a capital offense in Syria since the bloodbath at Hama in 1982.

On the surface, the arrests appeared to be a way for President Asad and other top officials to strengthen their position vis-à-vis hard-line critics within the regime in the run-up to the June 6 party congress. When Syrian authorities released the Forum members six days after detaining them, the latter confirmed the government had intended to send a message that cooperation with the banned Muslim Brotherhood was still forbidden and punishable. The decision to curtail the activities of the Atasi Forum solely due to its contact with the Muslim Brotherhood, a relatively moderate movement today, raises fresh doubts as to whether the congress will consider a political reform package of any consequence. Absent moderate outlets for political dissent, the Syrian stage increasingly is set for violent conflict between radical Islamists and the Asad regime.

Frustration in Damascus

Despite Washington’s repeated demands for economic and political reform in Syria, the proclamation of new reforms in Damascus, if that’s what occurs in June, is unlikely to produce a major shift in U.S. pol-

icy. As the senate confirmation hearings for John Bolton aptly demonstrated, the Bush administration has inflated the Syrian danger for some time. In part, this was done because Damascus undoubtedly could do more to support the United States in the war on terrorism. But the White House has also found Syria to be a convenient scapegoat for the failure of administration policies in Iraq. As the violence in Iraq escalated this spring, the Bush administration repeatedly complained that Syria was the main conduit fuelling the flow of men and money to the Iraqi insurgency. In this sense, current U.S. policy toward Syria reflects more a frustration with the insurgency than either diplomatic reality or domestic conditions within Syria.

Either way, real or imagined grievances against Syria mean U.S. pressure will not ease soon. On the contrary, the Bush administration appears to have abandoned any attempt at engagement. Instead, it is pursuing regime change on the cheap through a deliberate policy of destabilization intended to uproot the Asad regime through external pressure. In so doing, Washington seems oblivious to the tentative economic and political openings managed by the Asad regime in the past year or so. The White House has also ignored the wishes of Syrian activists, most of whom want Washington to back off.

Increasingly frustrated with U.S. failure to reward positive Syrian steps, like recent actions against the insurgents in Iraq and the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, Damascus halted military and intelligence cooperation with Washington in late May. The Syrian stance prompted renewed discussions at the highest levels of the United States government as to the diplomatic, economic, and military options available to deal with the “Syrian problem.”

Absent U.S. support, Syria has focused on a pending agreement with the European Union, its main trading partner. The agreement, which gives Syria greater access to European markets, is contingent on its full compliance with UN Resolution 1559, which calls for the removal of all Syrian forces, intelligence and military, from Lebanon. While Syrian trade with the United States approximates only \$400 million, the EU agreement is worth more than \$1 billion in aid and trade.

Time for Action

June 2005 is shaping up to be a make-or-break month for President Asad. The outcome of the Baath Party Congress will reveal much about the nature and motives both of Syria and the United States. Whatever happens, President Asad and the Baath Party clearly need to take dramatic steps. Timid policy change will only highlight the insecure and indecisive nature of the regime. This will embolden domestic and international opposition while confirming hard-liner belief in the need for tougher action at home. Alternatively, if President Asad unfurls a substantive agenda for socioeconomic and political change, he will rally support within the European Union, call the Bush administration's bluff and undercut domestic opposition in and out of the Baath Party.

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF), a joint project of the International Relations Center (IRC, formerly Interhemispheric Resource Center, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2005. All rights reserved.

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Recommended citation:

Ronald Bruce St John, “Syria’s Baath Party Congress a Watershed for President Asad,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, June 2, 2005).

Web location:

<http://www.fpiif.org/commentary/2005/0506syria-baath.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Ronald Bruce St John
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Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

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