

## Another Deeply Disappointing Speech by Bashar al-Assad

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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### Bashar al-Assad's June 20 speech at Damascus University was another disappointing attempt to quell three months of antiregime protests sweeping Syria.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's speech at Damascus University on June 20 was another disappointing attempt to quell three months of anti-regime protests sweeping Syria. While recognizing some of the protestors had legitimate concerns, Assad continued to blame the lion's share of the demonstrations on a "conspiracy" of "outlaws," "vandals" and "*takfiri* extremists."

Perhaps most offensively, Assad refused to recognize the regime's brutal crackdown on the protesters.

Most notably, he dismissed "rumors related to the president and his family" -- a reference to reports that his brother, Maher, was leading efforts to snuff out the demonstrations.

Also disappointing was Assad's lack of specifics on what reform measures he is actually willing to implement.

On one level, the fact that Assad dedicated his speech to themes of reform demonstrates that the Assad family is beginning to see the need for change under the pressure of growing anti-regime protests and international pressure from Turkey, France and the United States.

But instead of immediately implementing the measures by Presidential Decree -- which he can do under Syria's Presidential system -- he chose to push responsibility for the decision into various committees ahead of a "National Dialogue" that he vaguely said will roll out sometime in the next two months.

Assad promised to address corruption (which Transparency International's figures show has skyrocketed under Assad's reign), a new law for elections, increased media freedoms and local administrative reform.

Assad also dangled the prospect of constitutional reforms as well in response to a "new political reality in Syria."

Dissidents long struggling to break free of the ruling Ba'ath Party's chokehold on legal political parties have demanded the repeal of Article 8 of the Syrian constitution, which stipulates that the Ba'ath leads state and society. All the measures Assad outlined have been under consideration by the regime for years, so it's unclear what more discussion would be required for passage other than Assad's willingness to sign the measures into law.

In addressing the issue of why reform in Syria has been so slow, Assad said there was "no reason" -- a reference to his speech on March 30 in which he dismissed the notion that a group of hardliners or "old guard" figures were holding Assad back.

Assad indicated that Syria's parliamentary elections, which were originally set for August, may be rescheduled before the end of the year.

If fundamental constitutional reform doesn't take place ahead of the poll that would allow those elections to be "free and fair," the Assads' Ba'ath Party will continue to dominate Syria's parliament, guaranteeing that the democratic transition that the Syrian people now demand, and the Obama Administration supports, will not happen.

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[SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=template102.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](#)

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