

Baath Party Congress in Damascus:

How Much Change in Syria?

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Brief Analysis

Syrilian leaders hope that significant reforms introduced at the Baath Party's Tenth Regional Congress on June 6 will allow them to fend off both domestic challenges and foreign threats. Among the important issues on the Congress' agenda is the status of the Baath Party itself.

Obsolete Ideology

Since he assumed office in 2000, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad has struggled to redefine the role of the Baath Party. The tenets of Baathism -- freedom, unity, and socialism -- have become obsolete since the party seized power in the 1960s. At that time, Baath ideologues attacked bourgeois democracy, envisaging themselves as a vanguard party to lead society and limit the political freedom of the bourgeoisie. Baath discourse was based on the Marxist concept of popular struggle. This radical outlook was expunged by Syria's former president, Hafiz al-Asad, who favored Arab cooperation in the interest of confronting Israel. However, he maintained a socialist system of controlling and dividing the economy along functional lines. The public sector and popular organizations were transformed into fronts for the mobilization and control of Syrian society. Asad promulgated a "permanent constitution" in 1973 that named the Baath Party the "vanguard party in society and state."

By the time Bashar succeeded his father as president in 2000, socialism had become an outdated economic system lacking ideological vigor and a vehicle to enrich and protect the interests of senior Baath figures.

During the party's Ninth Regional Congress, held for the first time in fifteen years in June 2000, Bashar emphasized the need to rejuvenate Baathism's image. Asad hoped to use the party as a vehicle for rallying broad public support for his policies. He initiated largely open elections in the party branches, allowing junior Baathists to contend for seats in the Party Congress. The party also held new elections to its Regional Command and its Central Committee during the Congress. On the Regional Command, the highest body in Syria, newcomers took twelve of twenty-one seats. Sixty-two of the Central Committee's ninety members were newly elected. These appointments reflected Asad's intent to introduce new faces and establish a core of supporters in both offices. In addition, Asad reduced military representation on the Regional Command and increased its representation on the Central Committee.

In the wake of the Ninth Party Congress, a younger generation assumed leadership in local party organizations. In

July 2003, Asad issued a decree separating party and state; appointments to government offices would henceforth be based on merit rather than party affiliation. In early 2004, Asad issued another important decree forcing party officials to retire at the age of sixty. Meanwhile, debate has raged among Baathists and the Syrian public over the future of the party. Some decry Asad's policies as weakening the party, while others demand more radical reforms.

The Status of the Baath Party

It is against this background that the upcoming Party Congress will discuss a new law for political parties as part of a continuing process to redefine the role of the Baath party.

Syria outlawed political parties after the Baath Party took power in 1963. Beginning a series of reforms, known as the corrective movement, President Hafiz al-Asad ended the one-party system by establishing the Progressive National Front, which included socialist parties led by the Baath. He called this parliamentary representation *tadudia* ("pluralism"). Though the PNF monopolized political power, real power was wielded by the informal structure of the regime revolving around the president and his network of Baath leaders and Alawi military officials.

The PNF's monopoly of power has come under significant criticism since Bashar al-Asad assumed power. Bashar recently hinted at freedom for political parties. Reports have circulated that parties not based on ethnicity, religion, or sub-national allegiances will have a license to participate in the political process.

Asad's regime has intently courted the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party. Founded in Beirut in 1932 by the Greek Orthodox Antoun Saade, the radical, secular SSNP called for the reunification of Greater Syria (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, and Jordan, with Cyprus later added to the list). It became popular among the intelligentsia and college students, especially at the American University of Beirut. Syria outlawed the SSNP in 1955, after it was implicated in the assassination of Adnan al-Malki, an influential military figure. The party gradually re-organized during the last two decades of Hafiz al-Asad's rule.

The SSNP's commitment to Greater Syria dovetailed with Asad's desire to project his regional power. Significantly, the party supported Syria's hegemony in Lebanon. In April 2005, Bashar al-Asad allowed the SSNP to join the PNF. Coming barely more than a month before the Baath Party Congress, this decision confirmed that socialism was no longer the basis for PNF membership. In fact, Asad's decision lends credence to reports that the Baath Party will drop socialism from its official name (most likely becoming the Democratic Baath), and that the pan-Arab National Command would be dismantled.

Other parties that the regime may tolerate include the National Party, the People's Party, and the Nasserite Arab Socialist Union of the late dissident Jamal al-Atasi. Recently, Atasi family members Souhair and Rabab have formed a political club, the Atasi Forum, that has been active in the Syrian reform movement. Unlike other such clubs, the regime has not closed the Atasi Forum -- though its members were arrested on May 24, reportedly for reading a statement from the superintendent of the Muslim Brotherhood during their meeting.

What opposition parties most likely to be tolerated have in common is a nationalistic outlook and a general antipathy toward the West, especially the United States. The SSNP could become the second-most-popular party after the Baath.

It is safe to expect that Asad may further separate the Baath Party from the state, while continuing to rejuvenate Baathism, by replacing the old guard with less ideological, more pragmatic party members with an interest in reform. Correspondingly, the Regional Command may be purged of senior political figures, who will be replaced by younger Asad loyalists. This will complement Asad's attempts to open up the public sector by pursuing a kind of soft privatization and introducing gradual economic reforms to integrate Syria into the global economy.

Other issues that may be taken up at the congress include:

- Ending martial law, which has been in effect since 1963;
- Granting a general amnesty for political prisoners and allowing political exiles to return -- the regime has already allowed some political exiles, such as former president Amin al-Hafiz, to return;
- Suspending Law 49, which makes membership in the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood punishable by death; and
- Granting citizenship to approximately 100,000 Kurds who are permanent residents of Syria.

Conclusion

It appears that Asad sees the upcoming Baath Party Congress as an opportunity to unite a broad spectrum of Syrians to fend off American pressure. Asad also hopes to prevent the creation of a U.S.-supported opposition like Ahmed Chalabi's Iraqi Nationals Congress. In this respect, Asad is trying to create a pluralistic nationalist political front that can satisfy some demands for political and economic reform without endangering his rule. Moreover, recent arrests (including the head of the Arab Human Rights Organization), and the alleged murder by government of Muhammad al-Khaznawi, a Kurd and a prominent Muslim religious leader who had spoken for Kurdish political rights, the regime has marked a red line for the reformers that they should not cooperate with the Muslim Brotherhood or with Western institutions and governments, especially the United States.

Paradoxically, though Washington's relations with Damascus remain tense, U.S. pressure on Syria seems to be paying off by forcing Damascus to undertake overdue reforms.

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