Syria under Bashar al-Asad:

The Domestic Scene and the 'Chinese Model' of Reform

by Alan Makovsky **(/experts/alan-makovsky)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Alan Makovsky (/experts/alan-makovsky)

Alan Makovsky is a senior fellow for national security and international policy at the Center for American Progress.

Brief Analysis

This is the first of a two-part series marking the six months since Bashar al-Asad became president of Syria on July 17, 2000. Read Part II. **(templateC05.php?CID=1391)**

On January 11, a petition signed by a thousand Syrian intellectuals appeared in the Lebanese press demanding -- inter alia -- freedom of expression, release of political prisoners, and an end to martial law in place since 1963. A similar such petition, published in September with ninety-nine signers, has evidently sparked a broader movement. And on January 20, the first-ever elections for many positions within Bashar al-Asad's Baath Party will be held.

Does this mean that Syria is on the way to joining the modern world of democratic and moderate states? A better way to look at the situation is that Syrian president Bashar al-Asad faces the classic dilemma of the ruler of a faltering authoritarian state in the modern world: how to liberalize, and thus strengthen, the national economy without losing his grip on power. In the first six months of his quest for a Syrian version of the "China model," Asad has sought to build regime legitimacy through carefully-calibrated political reform; to revive the economy with a limited dose of free-market principles; and to ease tensions with previously hostile neighbors Turkey and Iraq in order to focus on bread-and-butter issues - control of Lebanon and hostility to Israel.

Syrian Glasnost . . . In domestic governance, Asad has shown a lighter touch and projected more openness than his father, without compromising the regime's firm control.

For Asad, the Baath Party elections are an opportunity both to broaden the base of the party and insert more of his own people into leadership positions (presumably he will manipulate the results). Asad has also let it be known he favors a multi-candidate presidential election, rather than a mere referendum, when his term expires in 2007.

There have been more concrete measures to reduce state oppression as well. Asad released some 600 political prisoners in November, more than two-thirds of them members of the Muslim Brotherhood, which led a short-lived insurgency against the regime in the early 1980s. And by all accounts, the signers of the two petitions demanding broader freedoms have not been jailed or harassed. Growing numbers of Syrian intellectuals are reportedly congregating in private homes, with government awareness, to discuss political reform. Meanwhile, authorities are tolerating public demands for freedom by the newly above-ground Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in

Syria and its leader Aktham Naaiseh, who was arrested from 1991 to 1998 for criticizing the regime.

Asad has also authorized the first non-state newspapers to be published in nearly a half-century. Of course, the right to publish these independent papers is limited to the six small political parties that join with the Baath in Syria's official ruling coalition, the Progressive National Front (PNF). The first such paper, published by the Communist Party, was issued earlier this month, and it included an editorial attack on the government's decision to authorize private banks in Syria. Meanwhile, government newspapers themselves now carry occasional articles criticizing government economic policy, sometimes heatedly. Like the Baath party elections, the widening of press freedom reflects Asad's frankly stated view that democratization must take place only within the context of the PNF.

Seeking to diminish the distance between citizens and the regime, Asad has sought to project modesty and ease his father's cult of personality approach to governance. Shortly after taking office, Asad ordered the removal of his picture and banners praising him from public places -- a noteworthy change in a country where public displays of fawning praise for the leader have long been the norm. He also popped up incognito (until recognized) in a shopping area of Aleppo. (His reclusive father had not visited Aleppo, Syria's second largest city, for more than two decades at the time of his death.) None of this amounts to a Damascus Spring. Yet these carefully modulated reforms mark a sea-change for tightly-controlled Baathist Syria. They also give Syrians hope that more is on the way.

. . . and Syrian Perestroika In the economic realm, the regime has announced a series of half-measures to loosen the state's tight grip on the market. Although few economists think these reforms will make anything more than a small dent in Syria's economic woes, they are pathbreaking within the Syrian context. Moreover, they demonstrate government recognition of Syria's problems, encouraging expectations that, as with the political reforms, more liberalizing reforms may be on the way.

In June -- even before Asad officially took office, but after his father's death -- Syria announced that foreign banks would be allowed to operate in its previously established free trade zones. Four Lebanese banks were the first to be approved for this purpose. Most noteworthy of the announced reforms is the December decision by the Baath Party's top decision-making body to allow private banks, consider banking privacy laws, establish a stock market, and loosen foreign exchange transactions. These decisions now await the implementation of legislation, which will be the real indicator of Syria's seriousness of purpose. Arousing hope in some quarters that the government is committed to economic improvement is the fact that the budget for 2001 was completed on time, a near-unprecedented occurrence.

Search for Legitimacy Asad seems aware that his Alawi-based regime needs to broaden its base of support, particularly among the Sunni majority. Despite the fact that a leading Lebanese Shiite cleric, Musa Sadr, recognized Alawism as a form of Shiism in the 1970s, many Sunnis look askance at it -- regarding it as essentially pagan and resenting Alawi dominance of the government and military. Perhaps to re-assure Sunnis, Asad has indicated his adherence to the Islamic mainstream in speeches to Arab and Islamic Conference Organization summits. Whatever the motivation for his New Year's Day marriage to the Syrian-British banker Asma Akhras -- even a political analyst cannot dismiss the possibility that it was purely love -- this union was replete with political symbolism. Akhras's London-based family hails from the Sunni elite of Homs, creating images of Sunni-Alawi unity and links between Damascus and the provinces. (Akhras's British connection and professional background also symbolically reinforce Asad's call for more Syrian economic openness and for greater women's participation in the economy.)

Asad appears to be pulling most of the strings, at least in domestic policy. Nevertheless, leading members of the old guard -- such as Vice-President Abdul-Halim Khaddam and Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass, once believed slated for rapid retirement under Asad -- reportedly remain influential, particularly in foreign policy. Should key elements of the Baath Party or the military decide Asad's reforms are undermining the regime's control, he will be forced to pull back or be pushed from power.

Conclusion Asad's approach to domestic governance has inherent tensions. When people grow tired of mini-reforms, how insistent will they be in demanding more? If more Western investors and bankers arrive, will they spread Western attitudes? Is it indeed possible to modulate economic and political reforms at different rates?

Political and economic reform under Asad has been more wide-ranging and faster paced than most Syria-watchers predicted -- certainly more than could have been imagined under his father. This is a sure sign that Asad recognizes Syria's economic deficiencies and the narrow base of its regime-support. Nevertheless, the fundamental elements of the Syrian system -- state dominance of the economy and martial law -- remain in place, with no sign of change on the horizon. Seeking to loosen up the system without affecting its collapse, Asad ultimately hopes to emulate the Chinese and avoid the fate of the Soviets.

Alan Makovsky is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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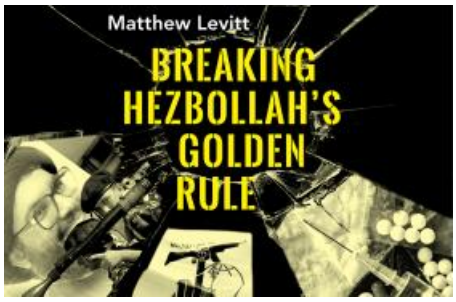

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