

Can Bashar al-Asad Hold On in Syria?

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Brief Analysis

Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad had a knack for bad timing. He delayed for years making his son Bashar his formal successor, wanting to get everything just right--and then he died a week before everything was to fall into place to make Bashar the anointed one. It seems very likely Bashar will nonetheless step into the presidency. Yet, the greater question is whether Bashar will fill his fathers oversized shoes, stabilizing his rule and surviving as his father had for the past thirty years.

Preparing the Succession. It had been an open secret in Arab and Western capitals that an unprecedented deterioration had occurred in Asads state of health during the last year and that his days were numbered. Over the past several months the process of grooming Bashar as successor had been accelerated. For the past several weeks Damascus has been alive with preparations for the investiture of Bashar al-Asad as successor to his father. The often-postponed Bath Party Congress was scheduled to convene on June 17, 2000, and it was expected to elect Bashar as a member of the partys ruling body (the Regional Command). That would have made possible naming him as a vice president, which would have formally made him the successor to Hafiz.

Alongside this, Bashar mounted a public relations campaign whose aim was to recruit support among the Syrian public. The image that Bashar presented included impeccability, an abhorrence of corruption, and intentions to make far-reaching reforms and changes in the Syrian economy in the direction of greater openness and liberalization. As part of this, a new government was established in March 2000. The former prime minister, Muhammad Zubi, became the scapegoat in the struggle against corruption. A warrant was issued for his arrest and his property was confiscated--steps that led Zubi to commit suicide last month. Other ministers and senior public personalities also came under the sword of the war against corruption. It should, however, be noted, that more than actually eradicating corruption, this campaign was designed to deliver the message from Bashar that he would not hesitate to take measures against his opponents.

Bashar has to be particularly concerned about the potential for opposition within the military. Some reports suggest that in the last two weeks, former Military Chief of Staff Hikmat Shihabi fled to Los Angeles, where his son lives. Shihabi had been removed in 1998 as part of a far-reaching move over the last five years to replace the old guard who were former colleagues of Hafiz al-Asad in the Syrian leadership and who might have been an obstacle in Bashars path. Others removed included Ali Duba, chief of the Military Security Service for the past three decades, and Muhammad Khuli, Air Force commander, and Bashir Najjar, head of the general security directorate (intelligence).

Alongside the attempt to create foci of support among the officers of the military and even among the Syrian public, Hafiz al-Asad did everything he could to grant his son experience in running the affairs of state. He involved Bashar in the administration of Syrian foreign policy and even entrusted him with managing Syrias involvement in Lebanon. Yet, this was an accelerated procedure, carried out in haste and never completed.

Can Bashar Consolidate Power? The first mission that Bashar must accomplish is securing the support of the family, the Alawi community, the military, and the security forces for him and his regime. This is by no means a given. Not even within the immediate Asad family does Bashar enjoy total support. His fathers brothers, Rifat and Jamil, more

than once in the past expressed their reservations about his candidacy. Last October, Syrian forces attacked supporters of Rifat near Latakia, killing at least several if not more. And whereas the old guard has been gradually removed from positions of influence, they still maintain a considerable amount of power. Both these elements will wait in the wings for Bashar to make his first misstep.

Bashar has been recognized for the past several years as an open-minded, Western-educated young man, aware of what is going on in the world and especially of Syrias need to join this world after thirty years behind a wall of isolation created by Hafiz al-Asad. The Western press has written extensively about his skills as an Internet surfer. These are not the qualities that Bashar needs to succeed at his new job, though. Bashar will survive only if he shows determination, leadership capabilities, charisma, and, finally, the necessary degree of brutality towards his enemies at home. Does Bashar have the "killer instinct"? Only time will tell, but Bashars ability to hold on to power depends on it.

If Bashar is able to consolidate his rule, the big question is whether he will then succeed in leading Syria onto a new path of change and openness, mainly in the economic sphere. After thirty years under Hafiz al-Asad, Syria has reached an impasse in the social sphere, and its economy is on the verge of collapse. From what Bashar has said on the subject over the past few months, it appears that his approach will be that of change combined with continuity. The fear seems to be that a too-dramatic change, in a country that had been under iron-fisted rule for such a long time, is liable to cause the Syrian structure to collapse. Thus, Bashar is likely to navigate a cautious route between the need for change and the need to maintain stability.

As for the peace process, Bashar has apparently inherited his fathers commitment to this process as Syrias strategic choice. Reaching a peace settlement with Israel would facilitate turning attention to domestic issues. At the same time, however, Bashar also inherited his fathers legacy of demands for Israeli withdrawal to the precise line of the "June 4, 1967, borders." Anyone who expects Bashar to demonstrate compromise or a pragmatic stance on this point is apparently deluding himself. Nevertheless, Bashar is different from his father: He is more open and more attuned to the world outside Syria. Unlike his father, he is likely to smile at the Israeli public and its government. If he is ready to engage in public diplomacy--something his father avoided like the plague--that will help to move the peace process forward. Unlike his father, who spoke to Israel with Hizballah shells, Bashar could speak to Israel like the man his father despised, Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, through press interviews, smiles, and even handshakes. Not that this will happen soon: Bashar could change the approach to Israel, were he so minded, only after he has stabilized his rule and feels sufficiently self-assured.

What does the future hold in store for Syria? Everything depends on Bashars ability to secure and maintain the support of key constituencies. His test has only begun.

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