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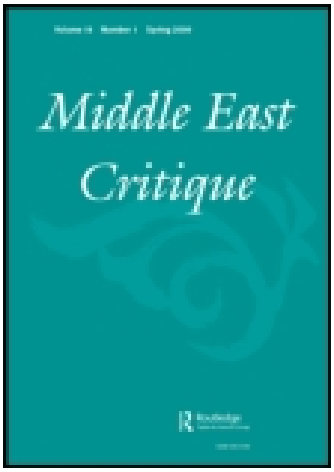

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The Ba'th Party in Post-Ba'thist Syria: President, Party and the Struggle for 'Reform'

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For the first five years of Bashar al-Asad's presidency the Ba'th party was a rival center of power, slowing Asad's reformist agenda. A struggle for power ensued over control of the levers of state power—military, security forces and government. Bashar al-Asad's constitutional powers of appointment gave him the advantage in this, but he only could prevail by politically contesting the influence of the old guard within the party itself. His success was crowned at the 10th Regional Congress in which the old guard was swept out of power. This article will focus on this pivotal period for it exposed the contours of intra-regime politics and was a watershed in steering the country into what appears increasingly to be a 'post-Ba'thist' period. The government is currently split between Ba'thists and neoliberal reformers and subordinated to a merely nominal Ba'thist leader. The old is dying but the new is not yet born; iconic of this are the contradictory messages to which students in Syria's schools are exposed: on the one hand the party-affiliated Revolutionary Youth Union still organizes them and they still recite the party's socialist slogans; on the other hand, the president's wife encourages 'young entrepreneurs' to think about setting up their own businesses.

Regime Formation and the Historic Role of the Ba'th Party

The Ba'th party played the decisive role in the rise of the current Syrian regime. The party recruited a generation of activists in the 1950s, many from minority, peasant or rural petit bourgeois families, some of whom went to university, others into the army. The party's capture of the army enabled the 1963 seizure of power, and party officers used their control of the army military organization to dominate the party after 1966. The party was crucial to giving the Ba'th regime, besieged in the cities, a power base and was a key mobilizational instrument in the carrying out its revolution from above, especially in the countryside.

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Hafiz al-Asad's coup ushered in the consolidation of the Ba'th regime. Asad concentrated power in a 'presidential monarchy' above the party. He used his control of the army to free himself of Ba'th ideological constraints and placed a core of largely Alawite personal followers in the security apparatus to give him autonomy of the army. Secure in control of the party and army, he appeased the private bourgeoisie through limited economic liberalization and fostered a state-dependent new bourgeoisie to create another leg of support. At the top of the power pyramid, elements of the Damascene Sunni bourgeoisie entered into tacit alliances with Alawite military elites, constituting the foundation of a new class, while at the base, the party and its auxiliaries incorporated a popular following from both Sunni and non-Sunni villages; thus, Asad built a cross-sectarian cross-class coalition, whose effectiveness proved itself in defeating the major Islamic fundamentalist uprising of 1978–1982. To stabilize the regime, Asad also depended on external resources: Soviet arms to build up the army and Arab oil money with which he expanded the bureaucracy and co-opted the bourgeoisie. The legitimacy of his regime was in good part based on its relative success in holding Syria's own against Israel, beginning with the 1973 Arab-Israeli war.[1]

Under Hafiz al-Asad the party played a pivotal role in the regime, albeit subordinated to the presidency. Under the 1973 Constitution it was accorded a privileged leading role that recently has become a matter of controversy. Though high-level policy was the prerogative of the president, he normally concentrated on foreign and security policy and left the details of economic matters to be decided between the party and government technocrats. Nor was the party, in contrast to Egypt's flimsy official parties, a mere creation of the regime, having had a long history as an ideological movement before coming to power. In power, it developed an elaborate institutionalized apparatus, based on a Leninist strategy of selective recruitment and indoctrination of militants from the lower and lower-middle strata, which penetrated schools, factories and villages and was linked to society by an array of corporatist 'popular organizations' (*munazzamat sha'biya*) of peasants, youth, women and workers. These organizations, which were given privileged access to decision-makers (denied to the bourgeoisie until the 1980s), accorded popular sectors some means to resist liberalization measures damaging to their own interests. Generally, the Ba'th party institutionalized the regime's populist-statist thrust: it incorporated constituencies that, initially possessed of little property, had a stake in statist policies—a big public sector, cooperative agriculture, populist regulation of the market—the social contrast on which regime legitimacy was contingent. As an elite recruitment pathway (along with the army) for peasant youth and minorities, the party sustained the initial cleavage between the social composition of the Ba'th state and the recovering bourgeoisie, the main social force pushing for economic liberalization. The party could not be readily shunted aside for it remained the regime's main connection to the provinces and villages, its original power base; the Alawi dominance of the ruling elite made the party all the more crucial to the regime's capacity to sustain support among the Sunni majority.

[1] See Adeed Dawisha (1978) Syria under Asad, 1970–1978: The Centres of Power, *Government and Opposition*, 13(3), pp. 341–354; and Raymond Hinnebusch (2001) *Syria: Revolution from Above* (London: Routledge), Chapter 4.

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Regime Power Structures

The Syrian Ba'th regime and the presidency which heads it rest on three overlapping pillars of power—the party apparatus, the military-police establishment and the ministerial bureaucracy. Through these interlocking institutions the top political elite seeks to settle intra-elite conflicts and design public policy, and, through their command posts, to implement policy and control society.

The president, who is also party general secretary and armed forces commander in chief, holds the legal and political reins of all three pillars of power, has numerous powers of command and appointment and is the main source of policy innovation. Second only to the presidency in policy-making power comes the Ba'th Party's Regional Command (RC) (*al-qiyadah al-qutriyah*),[2] the top collegial leadership body, roughly divided between senior military commanders, the most powerful cabinet ministers, and top party apparatchiks. It endorses policy initiatives and commands the party apparatus that systematically penetrates other institutions of state and civil society. The Council of Ministers (cabinet or government) is headed by a prime minister jointly appointed by the president and the RC, and assembles some 30 ministers who implement policy through the ministerial bureaucracy. The regime manipulates the composition of the parliament, with a majority of the seats reserved for candidates of the Ba'th party; hence parliament normally approves the initiatives of the executive branch. Under Bashar al-Asad the presidency became the origin of a spate of economic reform proposals, often delayed by the party but eventually approved by parliament and formally, although in practice often ineffectively, implemented by the Council of Ministers through the state bureaucracy.

The military is a main pillar of the regime. In 1963 when Ba'th officers brought the party to power, they inevitably became an equal partner in the new military-party state. However, Hafiz al-Asad, with a foot in both, became the first Syrian leader to maintain firm control over the army. As legal commander in chief, the president controlled appointments and dismissals of senior officers; in presidential guards units or Special Forces primarily charged with regime defense, appointments were based on political loyalty to, and (Alawite) sectarian or family affiliation with, the president. Alawite Ba'th officers also held a disproportionate number of top operational commands, especially of potentially coup-making armored units. The Ba'th Party's military organization exercised political control over military members and gave them some voice in party institutions, with about a third of the members of the party regional congress representing the military branches.[3]

The regime maintains multiple intelligence or security services (*mukhabarat*), whose function is surveillance of possible threats to the regime from external enemies, the opposition, the army, and each other; they vet all candidates for office and promotion, keep files on everyone's peccadilloes and loyalty and, after the Islamist insurgency of the 1970s and 1980s, assumed extra-legal powers. While they are instruments through which the president controls the other regime power centers and are formally supervised by the RC

[2] 'Regional,' in Ba'th parlance, denotes the institutions of Syria, a *region* of the wider Arab nation. The Ba'th Party also has 'national' institutions at the pan-Arab level, which in theory, but not in practice, are superior to its regional bodies.

[3] Alasdair Drysdale (1979) Ethnicity in the Syrian Officer Corps: A Conceptualization, *Civilisations*, 29(3–4), pp. 359–373.

Office of National Security, they are also powerful political brokers whose support ambitious politicians and prominent businessmen seek, and are even centers of initiative in political matters. The president however, periodically removes security chiefs to prevent them from establishing fiefdoms autonomous of his control or when they push their self-aggrandizement too far.The party organization consists of over 11,000 cells (*halaqat*) grouped in about 1,400 basic units (*firaq*) located in villages, factories, neighborhoods and public institutions. These units form 154 sub-branches at the district (*mintiqah*) or town level, grouped into 18 branches (*furu'*) in the provinces (*muhafazat*), big cities and major institutions (such as universities). Each unit has its own congress and executive command (*qiyadah*) headed by a secretary (*amin*). A parallel structure of branches exists inside the army and security services. At the national level, the Syrian Regional Congress (1,200 delegates in 2005) has been a main arena in which intra-regime ideological and, later, bureaucratic conflicts were compromised, elite turnover engineered and the stamp of approval given to major new policies.

Under party rules, party organs convene every five years, starting at the base level, to pass resolutions and elect delegates to higher-level assemblies, culminating in the national-level policy-making Regional Congress. In this process, ambitious local politicians need a patron at the top to in order to ascend far in the party hierarchy, but also need to cultivate constituents to win the local election needed to catch the attention of higher-ups; therefore, delegates to congresses at various levels sometimes arrive armed with resolutions reflecting the wishes of their constituents, and the leadership reports which form the basis of congress debates have sometimes incorporated such input. In the 1980s, however, and especially after the Muslim Brotherhood rebellion, elections ceased to turn on issues, official candidates were nominated from above, alternative candidates ceased to be tolerated and the security forces became pivotal in vetting and sponsoring candidates. More than ever, the leadership exercised its power to set the agenda, purge dissidents, and neutralize activists' use of elections and congresses to challenge incumbent officeholders. From the mid-1980s to 2000, the cycle of party elections was put on hold, with incumbents frozen in office and inner-party life largely deadened until Bashar al-Asad revived it in the late 1990s.

The Regional Congress, once elected, then elects the 90-member Central Committee, whose members include party functionaries, ministers, senior military officers, security barons, governors, heads of syndicates and university presidents, among others. The committee, in turn, elects the 15-member Regional Command. The Regional Command presides over the party apparatus through an array of offices for internal party organization and finance that administer the branches in the regions, while military and security bureaus oversee those in these services. In addition, bureaus for peasants and agriculture, economy, education, workers, and youth control the wider society. Each central office has a subordinate counterpart at the provincial branch and sub-branch levels, constituting a vertical line of command throughout Syria through which the party supervises the bureaucracy at all levels of the administration and popular syndicates to ensure they operate within the party line.

The Ba'th Party, Presidential Succession and the Intra-Elite Struggle for Power

Bashar al-Asad's rise to power completed the process Hafiz al-Asad had begun to establish his son as his successor. For the first time since the revolution, the president did not have a

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significant previous history in party politics. The succession was collectively engineered by the regime elite who, holding the top party and army positions, closed ranks to preserve regime stability and prevent an intra-elite power struggle, with the initial decrees investing Bashar al-Asad with power issued by the senior Ba'thist and First Vice President, Abdul Halim Khaddam, and Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas. As an Asad, Bashar assured the Alawites and was expected to defend his father's heritage; politically inexperienced, he was not thought to threaten the incumbent elite and he was, moreover, initially dependent on their support, which was given on the condition that he share power with them. Among the public, especially the younger generation, he was popular, seen as uncorrupted and, in fact, he came to power with an agenda to modernize the regime.[4] However, when during the Damascus spring (2001), opposition activists whom Bashar al-Asad had encouraged in order to strengthen his hand in pushing a reformist agenda began to challenge the regime itself, he realized his dependency on the party to sustain his authority.[5] As a result, while under Hafiz al-Asad the party was firmly subordinated to the presidency, in the vacuum left by his death its power briefly revived. A balance of power between the presidency and party, where each both needed and constrained the other, spelled a certain revival of institutions after Hafiz al-Asad's personal rule.

Indeed, the elections in 2000 to the long-delayed 9th Ba'th Party Regional Congress begun before Hafiz al-Asad's death both reflected and defined this power balance. Bashar al-Asad had used his father's party authority to liberalize the elections as a way of calling corrupt figures in the old guard to account, injecting new blood into the party and inserting his own allies into leadership positions. However, while the RC refrained from manipulating the elections, the security services tried to fill the vacuum. While many candidates stood in the name of change, specific issues were not debated and voting tended to turn on kin, regional and tribal loyalties. While the membership took the opportunity to remove many leaders that had been in office for the long years in which there had been no elections, they were replaced by local notables and careerists rather than activists committed to reform, and an alarmed Bashar al-Asad stopped the elections at the branch-level congresses. The Regional Congress, Central Committee and Regional Command were then co-opted from above in a compromise between various power centers, with the intelligence services excluding those whose keenness for change made their loyalty suspect. Only 20 percent of those elected in 1985 were re-elected, and five ministers lost their places in the first lower-level round. Moreover, 62 of the 90 members of the Central Committee were newcomers, reflecting the substantial change, stemming from retirements and purges, in the composition of the elite since 1985. Among those not returned were the once powerful intelligence bosses and close associates of Hafiz al-Asad, Ali Duba (Military Intelligence) and Muhammad Khuli (Air Force Intelligence). Surviving older generation figures included chief of staff Ali Aslan and Ibrahim Safi, a veteran Alawi army corps commander, while newcomers included younger Republican guard officers, Mahar Asad and Manaf Tlas. Twelve of the 21 members of the RC were newcomers. Among those remaining were: First Vice President Khaddam; parliament speaker Abdul Qadir al-Qaddura; Second Vice President Zuhayr Masharqa; General Mustafa Tlas, Defense

[4] David Lesch (2005) *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).

[5] *Middle East International*, September 1, 2000, p 15.

Minister, head of the party military bureau and chairman of the party military committee; Regional Assistant Secretary Sulayman Qaddah; and old guard ideologue, Ahmad Dargham, head of the RC organizational office. Gone were former Chief of Staff Hikmat al-Shihabi (who had opposed Bashar al-Asad's rise), former Prime Minister Mahmoud al-Zubi (who Bashar al-Asad had a hand in removing for his rampant corruption), Rifat al-Asad (who had been in exile since challenging Hafiz al-Asad in the 1980s) and Izz ad-Din Nasser, a Khaddam associate (who had made the trade unions a formidable base of power from which he built a fiefdom in public sector industry). Bashar al-Asad saw Nasser as an obstacle to economic reform and his fall signaled a loss of power for organized labor and the public sector industry. The election of newcomers Foreign Minister Farouk al-Shara' and Prime Minister Mustafa Miro ratified their arrival at the top of state institutions. The new RC was split between Khaddam, Miro and Bashar al-Asad loyalists, and the al-Asad loyalists, having reached their positions more from his patronage than from support within the party machine, lacked stature and were, to an extent, isolated by the old guard. New faces included Muhammad al-Husayn, a protégé of Miro yet loyal to Bashar al-Asad, who was appointed head of the party economic bureau and would soon become deputy Prime Minister for economic affairs; having studied in the East bloc and worked in the public sector, he was considered a statist but also a pragmatist supportive of moderate economic reform. The death of the former president opened the way for the congress to elect Bashar al-Asad as party general secretary, enabling the Regional Command to subsequently recommend him for nomination as president by parliament.[6] Finally, the selection of the leaderships of lower level party organs was liberalized. Under the old rules, the RC had presented a list to lower level congresses and that list would normally be elected; now, in a process called 'consulting' (*istinass*), these congresses nominated several candidates for the executive posts of their organizations and the RC appointed leaders from these candidates. As a result, a younger generation assumed leadership in local party organizations.

The Struggle for Economic Reform

Bashar al-Asad set out to make the presidency an instrument of major internal reform, something that his father, who built the system to conduct foreign policy, largely did not attempt. The separation of power between the presidency and RC meant Asad could only decide some issues unilaterally, and where RC approval was required and there was no consensus, policy-making was paralyzed; hence a struggle for power between the presidency and Regional Command over reform inevitably emerged. Asad rejected the idea that this could be reduced to a clash of generations or of the Ba'th vs non-Ba'thists since, as he said, there were reformers and anti-reformers inside and outside the party and in both generations.[7] In this struggle, the presidency had enormous constitutional powers—particularly appointment/promotion and dismissal/retirement powers over the bureaucracy and the military—which enabled Asad to gradually retire old guard officials and bring in a younger generation more beholden to him. Three-quarters of the top

[6] *Middle East International*, September 1, 2000, p. 15. *Daily Star*, June 15, 2000.
[7] Interview With Syria's President, *New York Times*. Available at: nytimes.com/2003/12/01.

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60-odd officials in political, security and administrative ranks were replaced by the end of 2002.[8]

The first key to power was Asad's securing of control over the security forces and the military. Hostile members of the old guard had been purged before his father's death, allowing him to appoint their successors, including his brother-in-law Shawqat Assef, while a survivor, Bahgat Suleiman, became his key ally. In the army he exercised his uncontested power to retire the older generation and promote younger second-rank Alawi officers who were beholden to him. Others, such as the Tlas brothers, were peers and friends.[9] As the coercive pillars of the state were secured by the president the contest shifted to the party and governmental institutions. However, the president enjoyed no comparable power of appointment over the party and his proposals for an extraordinary congress to enable new elections were blocked by the Regional Command. Nor could his control of the coercive apparatus readily be used against the party, something which he referred to as analogous to resorting to a nuclear weapon. This shifted the struggle for reform to the control of the government (i.e., the council of ministers and career bureaucracy).

The incongruence between the generational and ideological change in the presidency and the considerable continuity in the party leadership was reflected in struggles over the appointment of the four governments from 2000–2005. In each, Bashar al-Asad sought to bring in younger, technocratic, less corrupt or ideological, and more liberal ministers, either non-Ba'thists or Ba'thi reformers, but the Ba'thist share of ministerial portfolios never declined—an indicator of the very incremental nature of elite circulation. This reflected the fact that the presidency and Regional Command share the power to appoint governments. The traditional procedure was that the RC proposed a list of candidates (but only after it was vetted or even determined behind the scenes by the security services), while the final selection was made by the presidency according to such criteria as: confessional and regional balance (e.g., a proportion of Damascene Sunnis); representation of the various parties in the pro-regime alliance of parties, the National Progressive Front (NPF), while honoring the Ba'th party's 'right' as the ruling party to a majority of portfolios; and the need for competent 'technocrats' in ministries requiring specialized expertise. Asad negotiated a revision of the procedure under which the presidency would now present the RC with three names for each cabinet post, which the RC would reduce to two for each post, leaving the final choice to the president. The actual outcome was that governments had to be compromises, with the Regional Command able to insist on its share of posts; and although Asad was able to put reformists in many ministries, the more radical reformers were non-Ba'thists, hence they lacked a power base in the party and tended to find themselves blocked in their attempts to put through reforms.

The first post-Hafiz government—Bashar al-Asad's first attempt to appoint a new reforming generation—had actually been appointed before the previous president's death. Acting on behalf of his ailing father, Bashar al-Asad had dismissed Prime Minister Mahmoud al-Zu'bi and his cabinet in March 2000 and recruited a new government under Mustafa Miro, who had made his name as a strong governor of Aleppo, not in the party apparatus. Although 26 of the 36 ministers were Ba'thists, they were not senior

[8] Volker Perthes (2004) *Syria under Bashar al-Asad: Modernisation and the Limits of Change* (Adelphi Papers, London: Oxford University Press for IISS).

[9] *Middle East International*, July 14, 2000, pp. 10–12.

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figures.[10] After Bashar al-Asad assumed the presidency, he reshuffled the Miro government, reducing the number of Ba'thists to 19 and increasing political independents (from five to seven).[11] The main change was the replacement of the veteran economic team headed by Finance Minister Mahayni and Economy Minister Muhammad Imadi with 'modernizers': Ghassan al-Rifai, a World Bank economist, became Minister of Economy & Foreign Trade, and Mohammed al-Atrash, a graduate of British universities and non-Ba'thist social democrat, became Minister of Finance; Isam al- Zaim a French-educated leftist was appointed Minister of Industry with a mandate to reform the public sector, which, lacking a power base of his own, he would find impossible. East Europe-educated Ba'thist Dr Muhammad Al Husayn, head of the party economic bureau, became deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, well positioned to restrain any overly liberal enthusiasms on the part of al-Rifai.[12] A close Bashar al-Asad associate in the Syrian Computer Society, Saadallah Agha al-Qal'a, became Minister of Tourism. Heads of most politically crucial ministries remained veterans, including Defense Minister Tlas and Foreign Minister al-Shara'.

Bashar al-Asad soon become disillusioned with Miro who, in his view, used his position to foster a coterie of crony capitalists enriching themselves on monopoly licenses for the delivery of goods to Iraq. Before long, the cabinet was split three ways amongst Miro and his men, old guardists, and Bashar al-Asad's partisans. Asad used the crisis generated by the fall of the Iraq Ba'th in March 2003 to highlight the need for change, saying that the deadlocked government could not deliver economic growth. He asked parliament, by way of his ally and Miro's emerging rival, Speaker Naji al-Otri who had been appointed to make parliament more responsive to reform, to prepare reports on each minister's performance, and these sharply criticized the government. In the end, Asad convinced the Regional Command to change the government, and al-Otri formed a new cabinet. Otri initially presented a list with only five Ba'thists (including Shara' and Tlas) and dominated by liberal technocrats, many of whom were Syrian exiles. To strengthen his hand against the party, he tried to marshal support from the NPF parties and the chambers of commerce and industry. But the RC demurred, saying that one could not end the party role in government and launch a major liberalization at a time of external threats (from the US presence in Iraq). It insisted on negotiating a final list with Asad and the balance of votes in the Regional Command was such that the president had to accept this.

As a result, the share of portfolios held by the Ba'th party in the September 2003 government actually increased. Naji al-Otri (also a member of the party Regional Command) became Prime Minister, but Rafai's Ministry of Economy and Foreign Trade was stripped of its control of the strategic banking sector, the liberalization of which was the centerpiece of the government's effort to launch a market economy and which was transferred to the empowered Ministry of Finance under Ba'thist RC member Muhammad al-Husayn who remained deputy Prime Minister for the economy in charge of the cabinet economic committee; clearly the party, even though of a younger and more pragmatic generation, was to stay in charge of the key drivers of reform. A year after it took power, Otri's government was reshuffled. Major changes in the military sector included

[10] *al–Hayat*, March 7, 2000.
[11] *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, December 2001.
[12] *Syria Comment*, Friday October 8, 2004.

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the appointment of General Hassan al-Turkmani as Defense Minister, in place of old guard stalwart Mustafa Tlas who had retired, but who retained his party post as head of the military bureau. Neoliberal Economy Minister Ghassan al-Rifai lost his post, but independent reformer Abdullah al-Dardari became Minister of Planning and later was elevated to deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, becoming Asad's point man for driving ahead economic reform. Ba'thist liberal reformer Mahdi Dakhallah, editor of *al-Ba'th*, replaced Khaddam-loyalist Ahmad al-Hassan as Information Minister; from this time on, Vice President Khaddam saw himself as marginalized from the levers of power.[13]

Another struggle revolved around the relation of party and government. Under the existing Soviet-modeled system, the party, through its specialized offices, supervised the workings of government to ensure their conformity with party ideology and policy; but in practice, as ideology declined, this turned into patronage—the right of party leaders to appoint clients in government and, in return for various approvals, to extract payoffs from those doing business with the government. In order to liberalize the economy Bashar al-Asad had to end this intervention; but insofar as this meant an end to party patronage it risked undermining both the loyalty of the party and its ability to co-opt clients, and it was naturally resisted by party apparatchiki.[14] Nevertheless, in July 2003, Asad issued a decree that appointments to government offices and the public economic sector would henceforth be based on merit rather than party affiliation; initiatives in policy-making would be conceded to the government, with the party's role reduced to approving or amending these. The party was to cease intervention in the economy and day-to-day administration, although it would be surprising if informal intervention did not continue. Asad's initiative meant shifting power from the party to the government; hence from the regime's rural power base to the educated urban classes. Another prong of reform was an anti-corruption campaign. This was a way of threatening members of the old guard, who had been involved in corrupt activities for years, with exposure if they resisted the president. Asad encouraged the press to do investigative reporting that exposed corruption, at least among middle-rank officials, as a way of enforcing some accountability. This all aimed to put some limits on the rent-seeking that deterred significant productive investment.

The president increasingly monopolized the initiative in proposing new legislation within the cabinet, but it had to be approved by the party and ratified by parliament, which had been relatively empowered with the end of the dominant Hafiz al-Asad presidency and was controlled by the Ba'th party. Parliament responded to Asad's proposals with amendments or counterproposals that the president would often veto, with the result that reformist legislation might be watered down to such a degree that it was ineffectual. Another problem was that implementing reform depended on a bureaucracy staffed by Ba'thists and which lacked the outlook and technical capabilities to understand and undertake reform. Thus, a massive corpus of new laws and decrees was churned out, but much went unimplemented for various reasons: partly obstruction by vested interests, partly the lack of professional cadres with the ability to do so, partly the lack of proper conditions in society. As regards the lack of proper conditions, for example, a decree on the return of certain properties taken from landlords in the Jezira during the seventies could not be implemented because peasants now in effect occupied the land and nobody

[13] The Oxford Business Group (2003) *Syria Report*, Volume 40, September 26.
[14] *Economist* (US), November 18, 2000; *Financial Times*, August 26, 2003.

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was prepared to confront them. In an effort to renovate the civil bureaucracy, Asad issued a decree mandating retirement at the age of 60, a measure that set off a massive turnover in senior ranks.

The Struggle over Reform of the Party

Ultimately, the stalemate between president and RC could not be resolved without a showdown within the party itself. The old guard continually delayed major reforms, insisting that only the next congress could give them the stamp of ideological and party legitimacy. Hence the 10th Regional Congress scheduled for 2005 was widely seen as a watershed that would approve more significant, even radical, reform, but only if the reformers could manage its preparation. However, old guardist Mustafa Tlas chaired the congress preparatory committee and old-guard (and Alawi) ideologue Ahmad Dargham, as Organization Secretary, had key power over apparatus personnel. Asad, as party general secretary was, however, able to replace Dargham with his ally Ghayyath al-Barakat—a key move in renovating the party bases to Asad's liking. Also, a presidential decree required the retirement at age 60 of party employees, including the secretaries of the lower level executive committees, and the temporary appointments to vacated posts that Asad was able to make as party general secretary were likely to be ratified in the elections, given the influence that could be accrued from holding such office.

The preparatory committee was charged with examining reform of the party and in late 2003, questionnaires were mailed to hundreds of party members soliciting the free expression of their opinions on change, with responses supposed to be incorporated into a program that would be submitted to the congress. This opened a wide-ranging debate in the party, exposing several 'currents' within it. Those pushing hardest for reform were primarily urban intellectuals, political ideologues, such as Dakhallah, who did not hold posts with influence over state patronage. Many ordinary party members, not close to the levers of privilege and suffering from the same problems as the rest of the public, were also keen for reform. Rural party members who benefited from the Ba'th revolution, on the other hand, were less receptive to change. A key episode in the debate was the call of General Ibrahim al-Ali, a veteran Alawi officer, commander of the People's Army, and member of the party central committee, during an interview on Syrian TV, for the dismissal of RC leaders who opposed reform. This provocative intervention suggested that Asad had the support of key elements of the Alawi security forces, who had long been thought to oppose reform, and with which he could intimidate opponents in the party; simultaneously in the press, Asad's supporters launched a campaign identifying his opponents as corrupt.[15]

Asad apparently hoped that the forthcoming congress would ratify major changes, but it was soon apparent that it would convene in an extremely fraught atmosphere in which Syria was being besieged from without by the United States, present in Iraq and having successfully orchestrated the international pressures that had forced Syria out of Lebanon. 'After Lebanon,' according to one observer, 'a quiet and invisible storm is blowing through the leadership . . . So many expectations have been raised by the congress that any signs of real achievement would rally people behind a young president who, despite five

[15] *Tishreen*, April 25, 2005; *al–Ba'th*, April 7, 2005; *Syria Comment*, February 27, 2005.

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years of steadily eroding promise, still enjoys a good deal of latent goodwill.'[16] The fall of the Ba'th in Iraq and the debacle in Lebanon so highlighted the costs and obsolesce of the party's traditional pan-Arab ideology that some expected the congress to abandon the Ba'th's pan-Arab mission by abolishing the pan-Arab National Command of the party. The liberal Minister of Planning, Abdullah al-Dardari, was counting on elimination of socialism from the party's program to allow a move toward a market economy.[17] Party members and democracy activists both agreed on the need for political liberalization to generate unity against outside threats. Among political reforms expected were ending the martial law in effect since 1963; suspending Law 49, which outlawed membership in the Muslim Brotherhood; and granting citizenship to approximately 100,000 Kurds who were permanent residents of Syria. Syrian MP Ahmad Haj Sulayman, an Asad supporter, demanded that the congress establish the principle of sovereignty of law and mandate reforms of the judiciary.[18] Most hoped for was that the congress would approve abolishing article 8 of the Syrian Constitution which gave the Ba'th a permanent monopoly of power. Democracy activist Michel Kilo, interviewed in *Tishrin*, urged that the congress approve a Parties Law allowing opposition parties, establish the separation of powers, abolish emergency laws and limit the powers of the security apparatuses.[19] It was remarkable that such a debate was being carried out in the state-controlled press.[20] However, the regime was also signaling that certain 'red lines' still could not be crossed: arrests of secular intellectuals who were advocating a coalition with the Muslim Brotherhood indicated that the regime was not ready for such a rapprochement. The unsolved murder of Muhammad al-Khaznawi, a prominent Kurdish Muslim religious leader who had spoken for Kurdish political rights and aligned with the Brotherhood, may have been meant to underline a similar taboo against threats to 'national (sectarian and ethnic) unity.' And any opposition figures that were seen to cooperate with the United States in its campaign of pressure on Syria disqualified themselves from inclusion in a more liberal political order.[21] Skeptics predicted that the congress would merely topple 'several elderly, corrupt figures' as scapegoats for past failures and rubber-stamp arrangements dictated behind the scenes by the security forces.[22] Some insisted that a freely elected parliament, not the party congress, should determine Syria's future.[23] But Hassan Abd al-Azim, the leader of the National Democratic Union, the most prominent opposition force in Syria, was optimistic that renovation of the party leadership would lead to a dialogue with civil society and the 'national democratic opposition.'[24]

Elections for the Regional Party Congress (beginning at lower level congresses) began in April 2005. According to critics, the proposed reform program was not distributed to the membership so that it could form the basis of debate and candidate choice. In spite of this,

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[16] David Hurst (2005) *Los Angeles Times*, June 7.
[17] *Syriacomment*, March 23 & 26, 2005.
[18] *Tishreen*, May 24, 2005.
[19] *Tishreen*, May 17, 2005.
[20] *al-Thawra*, May 17, 2005.
[21] Robert Rabil (2005) Baath Party Congress in Damascus: How Much Change in Syria? *Washington Centre Policy Watch* #1000, June 2.
[22] *al-Nahar* (Lebanon), May 25, 2005.
[23] *al-Safir* (Lebanon), May 11, 2005.
[24] Champress, April 10, 2005.

candidates widely demanded that market and administrative reform be speeded up. However, none of the statements by the successful candidates mentioned the crisis over Lebanon or Syria's foreign relations.[25] The security services, apparently loyal to Asad, played their normal role in vetting candidates for election. A petition was circulated by party reformers, led by Ayman Abdul Nur via his Internet newsletter, and signed by 1,000 members, many highly placed, complaining that the corruption of the elections was excluding reformers. By the end of this campaign, 150 reformist delegates, including women, intellectuals, economists and law professors, had been added to the congress.[26]

The congress was held on June 6–9, 2005. In his opening speech to the 1,221 delegates, President Asad disabused those expecting him to lead a major revision of Ba'thism, insisting its ideas were valid although their implementation had fallen short. He chose to defend what he saw as Arabism under siege from the West, and, strikingly for a leader hitherto associated with an Internet revolution in Syria, denounced the manipulation of international communications by the USA against Arab identity as a plot aiming to destroy any capacity for resistance to its hegemony. Yet, he appeared to suggest that Syrian interests had to be prioritized and that Syria would refrain from pan-Arab entanglements, an acknowledgment of the costs of its involvement in Lebanon and Iraq.[27]

After three days of sometimes acrimonious debates, in three committees (organizational, economic and political), on the reports and recommendations presented by the leadership, the congress issued its resolutions. Symptomatic of an awareness of how far Syria was isolated in the Arab world, the congress called for the repair of relations with the other Arab states, especially Lebanon and Iraq. It endorsed what it called a 'social market economy'—in opposition to a neoliberal 'market economy'—through the gradual opening up of the Syrian market and privatization of certain fields of the economy, hitherto a taboo. Political liberalization would cautiously be deepened. The emergency law would not be abolished, but limited in its application to times of actual emergency such as wartime. The interference by the security services in such details as approval of licenses to open businesses was to be curtailed as a step in reversing their pervasive influence in society. A review of an old census could lead to granting citizenship to at least some of Syria's stateless Kurds.[28] No mention was made of dropping Article 8 of Syria's Constitution as the opposition had demanded; but a new party law was promised that would allow formation of other parties, providing they were not formed on the basis of any identity other than Arabism: Specifically, neither Islamic or Kurdish parties would be legalized. But the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, which had a traditional popular base that could compete with the Ba'th was admitted to the NPF. What was envisioned was some form of the highly controlled multi-party system that had already been in existence in other Arab states for decades.[29]

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[25] *al-Safir* (Lebanon), May 11, 2005.

[26] Nicholas Blanford (2005) *Christian Science Monitor*, June 17.

[27] Megan K. Stack (2005) *Los Angeles. Times*, June 7; *Syria Today*, 6 June 2005.

[28] Mohamed Sid-Ahmed (2005) Change in Syria? *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 16–22 June 2005. Available at: http://www.weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/747/op13.htm; Ronald Bruce St John (2005) New Syria Acts, Looks like Old Syria, *Foreign Policy In Focus*, June 20. Available at: http://www.fpif.org/, accessed.

[29] Oxford Business Group (2005) Syria: Congress Conundrums, June 15, 2005; (20050 Prying Open Syria, *Der Spiegel Online*, June 15. Available at: http://www.spiegel.de/international/0,1518,360601,00.html

More significant was the wholesale fall of the old guard. The biggest change was the resignation of First Vice President Khaddam, the second most important man in the country and who, as one of Hafez's closest political allies, had been at the center of power for 35 years. He had been on increasingly bad terms with Bashar al-Asad and increasingly marginalized from his power base by the president. He announced he would step down when he was slighted by the selection of Faruk al-Shara' over him to head the congress political committee and after a sharp debate with Shara' over responsibility for the debacle in Lebanon. Also removed were former Prime Minister Miro, Vice President Zuhayr Masharqa, former Defense Minister Mustapha Tlas, and the former assistant secretary general of the Regional Commands, Sulayman Qaddah, as well as the former Speaker of Parliament Abd al-Qadir Qaddura. The average age gap between the young president and these retired barons was 30 years. The anti-corruption campaign may have enabled Bashar al-Asad to subtly threaten the old guard that they could be brought to account for their illicit wealth if they did not go quietly. With the removal of the last major Sunni barons in the inner circle, Asad's personal power was consolidated. Those remaining on the RC were Foreign Minister Faruk Al-Shara', the lone surviving political figure whose prominence predated Asad's presidency, Prime Minister Muhammad Naji al-Otri, and Finance Minister Muhammad Husayn. Newcomers included the new Speaker of Parliament, Mahmud al-Abrash, Defense Minister Hasan al-Turkmani, and Minister of Expatriate Affairs Buthaina Shaaban. Old guard military barons and intelligence bosses, including Alawi generals Ali Aslan, Adnan Badr Hasan, Shafiq al-Fayyad and Ibrahim al-Safi, were removed from the Central Committee, while Asad's two peers, his brother Maher and Manaf Tlas, were re-elected. The other major change came one week after the conference when Asad replaced Bahjat Sulayman, the powerful Director of Interior Security, thought to have been his main patron in the security services, signaling his independence of such support. The congress thus satisfied pent-up demands within the party for upward mobility that had been blocked by the decades-long hold of the older generation on top power positions. Asad took advantage of the strong desire for change both within and without the party and the perception that the old guard was obstructing it.[30]

The priority for the congress became crafting a consensus for enough change to broaden the base of the regime in order to stand up to external pressures. For one Syrian analyst, the congress represented a show of force, conveying a message to those who believed it would cave in or dissolve under international pressure that the Ba'th Party remained in control. Many of the expectations of reformers within and especially without the party were disappointed. Reformist Ayman Abdel-Nur provided the most nuanced explanation. The party, he claimed, was a heterogeneous movement incorporating all the diverse groups of Syrian society, hence its resolutions inevitably expressed a 'lowest common denominator' and were bound to be general, even vague. In the congress, reformers had argued that without liberal market reforms Syria could not attract investment and, with oil exports set to decline, would otherwise have no way of providing employment for its burgeoning population. The worker and peasant contingents of the party had resisted such reforms that they saw as privileging the private sector and which would inevitably sacrifice acquired labor rights. The leadership, at a time of external threat, prioritized avoidance of a split that

[30] Sami Moubayed (2005) Syria: Reform or Repair? *Arab Reform Bulletin*, 3(6), Carnegie Endowment for Peace. Available at: http://www.carnegieendowment.org.arb.

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a hard reformist line would have provoked. The new leadership elected at the conference included only a minority of ardent reformers, but, most of them being of modest income, they lacked vested interests to protect and were, therefore, unlikely to obstruct reform as the old guard had done. He insisted the congress was only a first step and the way had now been cleared to accelerate reform.[31] The party that has slowed down reform for five years had now, apparently, embraced it and legitimized it, even if there were bound to many future conflicts over its exact meaning and extent. In 2007, Asad was inaugurated for a second seven-year term, his personal power consolidated without resorting to violence, and through legal and institutional means. Those who feared in 2000 that he was not suited to the job appeared to have been proved wrong.

When the old guard was retired, the resistance of the party to the president's initiatives declined, and he was able to shift power to state institutions, notably the cabinet, and Ba'th Party apparatchiks increasingly lost power to government technocrats. They appeared to be following a neoliberal agenda undiluted by the idea of a social market economy endorsed by the congress, owing to its failure to lay down a model or strategy for transition to such an economy—a deliberate vagueness that allowed the government to do what it pleased.[32] The elimination of the main opposing centers of power did not, however, eliminate the inertia and hostility of the underqualified, poorly motivated bureaucracy charged with carrying out reform; Asad's strategy was to prioritize the reform of education in order to produce the more qualified cadres needed in government. But he lacked a political movement to energize reform, as the Ba'th could not readily be transformed into a liberal party. It was also unclear whether the young Turks moving up into power positions vacated by the old guard were more amenable to reform or less corrupt than those they replaced. The tendency of Asad to rely on his kin in place of the purged old guard seemed to simply transfer opportunities for rent-seeking from them to his mother's family, the Makhloufs.[33] This reflected a core reality: In the stage of 'crony capitalism' that intervenes in the transition from statism to market capitalism, building a power base was impossible without the use of patronage to foster ones 'own' crony capitalists.

The Party Bases and Reform

Is the composition of the Ba'th Party undergoing changes compatible with the president's reform agenda? Through the 1980s, the Ba'th Party was overwhelmingly composed of teachers, state employees, peasants, workers and soldiers, with only 1–2 percent from upper-strata backgrounds; it therefore incorporated into the regime an alliance between the state-employed middle class and the working classes, with around 60 percent of membership from the latter. The leadership was, as measured by educational credential credentials, of middle-class status, although many were of plebeian origin. Among leadership cadres, a quarter had higher education (compared to only 3.36 percent of the overall membership), and nearly half had secondary education, with the education level

[31] Joe Pace (2005) Interview with Ayman Abdel Nour—Editor-in-Chief of All4Syria, *Syria.comment*, 21 July. Available at: http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog.

[32] Samir Seifan (2010) *Syria on the Path to Economic Reform*. St Andrews Papers on Contemporary Syria (St Andrews: St Andrews University).

[33] (2005) *Syriacomment*, March 2. Available at:

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rising with each level in the party hierarchy. Since the 1980s, there was a drive to increase the recruitment of professionals who hitherto had escaped incorporation, and in 2003 higher education was made a prerequisite for election to leadership positions, indicative of Bashar al-Asad's drive to put 'modernist' elements in charge of the party apparatus. The party also is strongly represented in the academic community (56 percent of the faculty in University of Damascus; 54 percent at the University of Aleppo; 79 percent at Tishreen University in Ladhaqiya' and 81 percent at al-Ba'th University in Homs). The proportion of peasants, 16.5 percent (297,000), approximately 33 percent of total peasants, has remained roughly constant since 1980 (17.63 percent). However, if students, whose social origins are indeterminate, are excluded from the count, the proportion of peasants steadily *declined* from 35 percent in 1980 to 28 percent in 1984 to 25 percent in 1990; this is indicative of the urbanization of Syria and the drive to recruit from the professional and bureaucratic classes and signals an erosion of the traditional rural-centeredness and plebeian character of the party, although many in the party are likely to be sons of peasants.

By the time of Bashar al-Asad's succession, the party had reached 1,815,597 members (18 percent of the adult population, up from 8.36 percent in 1984), of whom 406,047 were 'active members' with voting rights and the rest 'supporting members.' Sixty-seven percent of the members were below age 30 and 18.75 percent between 30–40, reflective of Syria's young population profile. Thirty-six percent of members were students and 61 percent of all students were party members, mostly in the supporting category; and many were purely nominal members, a function of the advantages of membership for access to university places, scholarships and the military academy. Women constituted 34.56 percent of the membership, most in the supporting member category, but an increase of over 400 percent since 1985, reflective of a rise in education and employment among younger women.

Inevitably, as the Ba'th seemingly turned, especially in the 1990s, from an ostensibly ideological party into a more all-inclusive mass party, many members no longer could be assumed to be committed to party ideology or even necessarily to the regime. The regime's overt promise of special privileges to members and its tolerance of the abuse of party position for private ends inevitably attracted a growing proportion of *intihaziyin* (opportunists), while more ideologically committed elements, disillusioned by the anti-Palestinian intervention in Lebanon and elite corruption, left the party in the late 1970s and during the 1980s. By the time of Hafiz al-Asad's death, top party leaders had used political office to enrich themselves, constituting a class of new rich with a stake in the status quo and no interest in political reform. They were mirrored at the lower level by local bosses who had not faced election in a decade and a half. This is the party Bashar al-Asad inherited.

By 2000, there was widespread discontent in the party bases about the corruption of the leadership, and this benefited Bashar al-Asad's drive against the old guard. An opinion poll (whose reliability is uncertain) taken of Ba'th Party members in 2004 suggested a palpable shift in member attitudes from the 1970s when they were relatively congruent with the party's secular nationalist-populist ideology. Reputedly, roughly 25 percent of members said they would vote for Muslim Brotherhood or Muslim Brotherhood-backed candidates in an election and another 25 percent reported they would vote Islamic-Nationalist; in some Sunni villages, reputedly the regime actually is perceived as Alawi (i.e., not Ba'thi, hence not 'ours' but 'theirs'). In contrast, among new generation party

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members, and especially in the urban areas and among the sons of the elite, there was little ideological resistance to liberalization. Far from being mistrustful of business as Ba'thist militants formerly were, many were keen for it, and their stand on liberalization therefore may depend on whether they calculate that it will increase their opportunities or threaten their monopolies and inside connections. Thus, the party was being penetrated by the diverse orientations, social cleavages, and contradictions of Syrian society as a whole, relatively unmediated by common ideological orientation.

Further changes are now beginning as a result of Bashar al-Asad's reforms. The end to obligatory ideological education in universities and secondary schools, together with the reduction in privileges for party members in relation to access to university places (while four new private universities have opened, largely free of Ba'thist influence), gradually will shrink the student base for recruitment to the party. The decline in public service jobs and other kinds of patronage reserved for party members and the parallel stress on merit recruitment to government office spells a shift of power from the party to the government, and hence from the rural areas to the educated urban classes.

Ba'thi corporatism is also losing its populist character. Under Hafiz al-Asad, as economic liberalization began, the chambers of commerce, representative of regime-connected business interests, began to acquire regularized access to decision-makers, notably the Prime Minister, in a way comparable to that long enjoyed by the worker and peasant unions, which, however, continued to enjoy their special connection to the party apparatus. The big change under Bashar al-Asad is that his regime, conscious of a pressing need to encourage investment, deliberately began to open up privileged access for businessmen directly to the presidency; also, a new Ministry of Expatriates was created explicitly to foster and satisfy expatriate investors. At the same time, the trade unions lost the privileged power position they had enjoyed in the later Hafiz al-Asad period under influential party boss Izz ad-Din Nasser. As long as the power balance between president and party lasted, workers and peasants retained the clout to obstruct liberalizing measures that overtly favored investors. What remains to be seen is whether the subordination of the party to the Bashar al-Asad presidency will mean its transformation into an instrument for imposing neoliberal discipline on workers and peasants.

Conclusion

The Ba'th Party was a decisive factor in the rise of a new elite, the consolidation of the Asad regime, and the durable populist thrust given to government power for decades. However, in the 1980s, it degenerated into a clientelist network and a shield against accountability. After the 2000–2005 period of rivalry between presidency and party, Bashar al-Asad reasserted the dominance of the former over the latter and now has a freer hand to further empower other institutions of the state, such as the government and parliament. The party's former performance of key functions in the political system is contracting, notably political recruitment to high office, approval of policy, and interest articulation for the regime's constituency. It appears to exercise little of its former constraint on the leadership; but, neither can it assist in economic reform. It remains important, however, for the regime's ability to control society where its network cuts across sectarian and class cleavages. It remains the main instrument through which the regime seeks to retain its original constituency even as, reneging on the populist contract, it increases its supporters susceptibility to Islamic countermobilization.

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