Is this the end of the Assad dynasty?

by Patrick Seale
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A great clamour for change has arisen in more than a dozen Syrian cities in recent weeks. Has the time come for President Bashar al-Assad to give way to pressure from the street and perhaps even to bow out altogether?

The disturbances started in mid-March in Daraa, a southern city on the border with Jordan, when a dozen children were manhandled, arrested and carried off to Damascus for scribbling hostile graffiti on a wall. Distraught parents came down into the street to vent their anger at such heavy-handed brutality. They were soon joined by others. The uprising had begun and soon spread across the country. No doubt it was inspired, in part at least, by the display of people power which has leapt with contagious speed from one country to another, shaking the foundations of Arab autocracy and giving a great jolt to the immobile political order in the Middle East.

In Syria, the authorities then made what may prove to be a fatal mistake. In a move that looked like panic, the security forces used live fire against the protesters – and have continued to do so. By the end of April, over 550 people had been killed in different locations around the country, while many more were wounded and possibly two thousand arrested. With little reliable information coming out of Syria it is impossible to be certain of the figures. The state used particular violence against Daraa, a poor city in an agricultural region which has suffered from government neglect and crippling drought in recent years. As if to punish it for initiating the troubles, tank fire was used to quell the protests and something like a siege put in place. Electricity and water were cut off and food became scarce.

The deaths in Daraa and elsewhere – and the emotional funeral processions that followed – have clearly aroused great rage in the population and a thirst for revenge. President Bashar al-Assad's legitimacy has been eroded. A strident call is ringing out increasingly for the fall of the regime. The president is now fighting for his political life and for that of the regime put in place in 1970 by his father, the late President Hafez al-Assad.

Forty-one years in power

The rule of the Assads, father and son, has now lasted 41 years, a score comparable to that of other long-lasting Arab autocrats, each apparently determined to be a *président-à-vie*. In no other part of the world have so many rulers clung so assiduously to power. Bashar appears genuinely to have believed that the Arab nationalist ideology he inherited, his opposition to Israel

and his support for resistance movements such as Hizbullah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, gave him immunity from popular discontent. In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal* on 31 January, he claimed that Syria could not be compared to Egypt. “Why is Syria stable,” he asked, “although we have more difficult conditions? Egypt has been supported financially by the United States, while we are under embargo by most countries of the world. We have growth although we do not have many of the basic needs for the people. Despite all that, the people do not go into an uprising. So it is not only about needs and not only about reform. It is about the ideology, the beliefs and the cause that you have. There is a difference between having a cause and having a vacuum.”

Unfortunately for Bashar, this analysis has proved wrong. As if caught unawares, his first public speech on 30 March was a public relations disaster. It was delivered to an obedient parliament, which interrupted him repeatedly with acclamation and crass plaudits. In an aside, he seemed to concede that external crises had distracted him from making the reforms he had intended when he first took office. In a second speech on 16 April to his newly appointed cabinet, he announced the lifting of the hated state of emergency, in force since the Ba’ath Party seized power in 1963, and the abolishing of the dreaded Special State Security Court. But even these moves came to seem half-hearted when it emerged that demonstrations could only be held with prior permission from the interior ministry.

The difficult and perilous task Bashar now faces is nothing less than the profound restructuring – under great popular pressure – of a fossilised system of governance inherited from his father, but which is no longer appropriate to the modern age, and no longer tolerated by the bulk of the population. Like other Arabs, Syrians want real political freedoms, the release of political prisoners, an independent judiciary, the punishment of corrupt bigwigs, a free press, a new law on political parties allowing for genuine pluralism (and the cancellation of article 8 of the constitution which enshrines the Ba’ath Party as “the leader of state and society”), and an end, once and for all, to arbitrary arrest, police brutality and torture.

Can Bashar meet these demands? Does he have the will and ability to do so? Can he hope to prevail over the entrenched interests of his extended family, of his intelligence and army chiefs, of powerful figures in his Alawite community, of rich Sunni merchants of Damascus traditionally allied to the Assad family, and of the small but powerful “new bourgeoisie”, made rich by the transition from a state-controlled to a market-oriented economy, over which he has himself presided in the past decade? All these disparate forces want no change in a system which has brought them privilege and wealth. Above all, can Bashar change the brutal methods of his police and security forces? Could anyone in just a few weeks hope to change habits of repression ingrained over

half a century, and indeed far longer? (For autocracy is not an Assad invention.)

The Bashar years

Until the outbreak of the crisis, Bashar al-Assad had little or nothing of the menacing pose of a traditional Arab dictator. His manner was modest and, at 45, he looked astonishingly young. His tall willowy frame has none of the robustness of a fighter, while his gaze, questioning and often perplexed, has none of the certainties of a man born to power. He was a young doctor studying ophthalmology in London when the accidental death in 1994 of his elder brother, Basil, an altogether tougher character who was being groomed for the succession, propelled him somewhat reluctantly onto the political scene.

The country he came to rule in 2000 seemed backward in an increasingly globalised and technologically advanced world. His first reforms were therefore financial and commercial. Mobile phones and the internet were introduced. Private schools and universities proliferated. In 2004 private banks and insurance companies were allowed to operate for the first time, and a stock exchange was opened in March 2009. A political and economic alliance was forged with Turkey (and visas abolished), which allowed trade to grow along that border, benefiting Aleppo. The Old City of Damascus was revitalised, ancient courtyard houses restored and hotels and restaurants opened to cater for the growing number of tourists. Before the crisis erupted, Syria was negotiating to join the World Trade Organisation and conclude an association agreement with the European Union.

But Bashar's years in power seem to have hardened him. He developed a taste for control – control over the media, over the university, over the economy (through cronies such as his exorbitantly rich cousin Rami Makhlouf), control over society at large. Free expression is not allowed. Political decision-making is restricted to a tight circle around the president and security services. Like his father, Bashar clearly does not like to be pushed around or to seem to yield to pressure. Even so, many Syrians still support him in the belief that, as an educated, modern and secular ruler, he is better placed than most to bring about necessary change.

At the time of writing, Bashar still seems to have a chance, if a slim one, of stabilising the situation and perhaps earning a further spell in power – but only if he calls a halt to the killing of protesters and takes the lead of the reform movement, and in effect carries out a silent coup against the hardliners.

But it may well be too late for that. Indeed, Bashar may already have lost authority to men like his brother, Maher al-Assad, commander of the regime's Republican Guard, who seems to advocate crushing the protests by force. If the

army and the security services remain loyal, it will be difficult for the opposition to unseat the regime. But there have been ominous rumours of army defections as well as reports that some members of the Ba'ath Party have resigned.

It needs to be recognised that the Assad regime does have determined enemies, at home and abroad, who conspire against it in the neighbouring countries – Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and also Israel – and among Syrian exiles in London, Paris and the US. These enemies have smelled blood. Riding on the turbulent wave of popular dissent, they will not easily give up. According to US diplomatic cables, released by WikiLeaks and published in mid-April in *The Washington Post*, the State Department secretly financed a London-based network of Bashar's opponents to the tune of $12m between 2005 and 2010.

A continuous whole

It is probably fair to view Bashar al-Assad's term of office and that of his father as a single continuous whole. Not only did Hafez al-Assad decide that Bashar should succeed him, but he also bequeathed to him an autocratic system based on an all-powerful centralising presidency, and a set of principles and external allies and opponents which together determine Syria's foreign policy. Bashar's whole career – like that of his father before him – has been shaped by Syria's contest with Israel. Syria has had to live, fight and survive in a hostile Middle East environment shaped by Israel's overwhelming victory over the Arabs in the 1967 war, its seizure of extensive Arab territories including Syria's Golan Heights and its subsequent close alliance with the US, which put in place a sort of dual US-Israeli regional hegemony from which Syria and its allies have sought to free themselves ever since. The 1973 war waged by Egypt and Syria to recover lost territories and force Israel to negotiate a global peace had some initial success but failed to realise its objectives. Instead, Egypt made a separate peace with Israel in 1979 and was removed from the Arab line up. The rest of the region was then exposed to the full force of Israeli power.

Looking to its defences, Syria established a partnership in 1979 with the newborn Islamic Republic of Iran. And once Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 in a bid to expel Syrian influence, destroy the PLO and bring Lebanon into its orbit, Syria found local allies among the Shia resistance movements of South Lebanon – of which Hizbullah became the most prominent. Waging a guerrilla war, and benefiting from logistical support and weapons from Iran and Syria, Hizbullah managed to force Israel out of South Lebanon in 2000, after an 18-year occupation. From this was born the Tehran-Damascus-Hizbullah axis, which over the years grew into the principal regional challenger of the US and Israel.

Both the US and Israel have done their utmost to disrupt this axis and prevent it acquiring any effective deterrent capability: Iran has faced constant

demonisation, sanctions and threat of military attack because of its nuclear programme, while Israel has made repeated attempts to destroy Hizbullah, including its war on Lebanon in 2006. Syria, in turn, has faced intimidation, isolation, US sanctions and an Israeli attack in 2007 on its alleged nuclear facility.

Bashar has had to wrestle with his own crises. He survived George W Bush's "global war on terror" after 9/11, then faced the greater ordeal of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and the long occupation that followed. Had the US been successful in Iraq, Syria would have been the next target, as pro-Israel neocons, the main architects of the Iraq war, had intended. Syria was then confronted by the 2005 Lebanese crisis, triggered by the assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri. Syrian forces were ousted from Lebanon and the Assad regime threatened with extinction by the combined pressures of the US and France.

There is also a much older memory that still hangs like a dark cloud – that of the massacres at Hama in central Syria in 1982. It was then that Hafez al-Assad put down, with great violence, an armed insurrection by the Muslim Brothers. Beginning in 1977, this Islamic group had launched a series of terrorist attacks against the regime, murdering several of the president's close associates and eventually seizing control of Hama, where they killed Ba'ath Party and government officials. The regime regained control of the town, but only after a bloodbath in which between 10,000 and 20,000 people lost their lives.

Thirty years later, some Islamists still dream of revenge, while minorities such as the Alawites fear that if the regime were to fall, they would be massacred in turn. Emerging from underground, the Muslim Brothers have now called on the people to join the protests. The cry for freedom risks being drowned by sectarian strife.

Such has been Bashar al-Assad's harsh apprenticeship. He has had to surmount a series of regime-threatening crises much like those his father confronted in his time. Both Assads felt some satisfaction at managing to survive them and thus provide Syria with a measure of stability and security, especially compared with Iraq and Lebanon. There was, however, a price to pay. Having to live and survive in a hostile environment inevitably conferred great powers on the security services, guardians of the regime – to the increasing resentment of ordinary Syrians. A dialogue of the deaf ensued. The Assads' intense preoccupation with external crises led them to neglect the internal scene. Who would need political freedoms, they no doubt thought, if given the benefits of security and stability? As the regime's official daily newspaper *Tishrin* wrote on 25 April: "The most sublime form of freedom is the security of the nation."

The recent explosion of popular anger has evidently taken Bashar by surprise, as it did other Arab autocrats. He has had to wrench his attention away from the perils and excitements of foreign policy to urgent challenges at home. To devise and implement far-reaching domestic reforms, as the present situation urgently demands, will require a radical change of focus. It will not be easy, and a favourable outcome is far from certain. Bashar now faces an internal threat to his regime at least as dangerous as any of the external threats he and his father confronted so successfully.