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Syria

A review of the origins and development of the revolutionary process (part 1)

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For nearly three years now, the majority of observers have analysed the Syrian revolutionary process in geopolitical and sectarian terms, from above, ignoring the popular political and socio-economic dynamics on the ground. The threat of western intervention has only reinforced this idea of an opposition between two camps: the western states and the Gulf monarchies on one side, Iran, Russia and Hezbollah on the other. The advance of the jihadis of Islamic State (IS) in Iraq in recent months has also reinforced the dichotomy between authoritarian regimes on the one hand and jihadi and Islamic reactionary forces on the other.

The increasing militarisation and the rise of reactionary Islamist in the revolutionary process has also led numerous observers and analysts to put aside the reasons for the outbreak of the popular uprising three years ago for liberty and dignity against the dictatorship of the Assad regime and to ignore the popular movement which still exists, despite its continued weakening, for two major reasons: the terrible repression of the regime's security forces and the rise of the reactionary and Islamist armed forces who have attacked the activists and members of the Free Syria Army (FSA).

To understand the evolution of the Syrian revolutionary process over the past three years, we should first take a brief historical review. We will analyse the regime put in place in the era of Hafez Al Assad and its consequences for Syrian society. In 2000, Bashar Al Assad accelerated neoliberal policies, despite a short period of a supposedly democratic opening known as the Damascus Spring of 2000 which rapidly closed.

We will then analyse the reasons for and dynamics of the uprising, which should be studied in relation to the revolutionary processes underway in the region, but also according to its specific characteristics (situation, actors, meaning). Finally, we will touch on the development of the uprising, from peaceful opposition to the current armed radicalisation.

We will attempt to demonstrate the diverse ramifications and complexity of the Syrian revolutionary process, questioning the terms broadly used today to describe the situation in Syria, like civil and/or confessional war. These notions do not allow us to grasp events and propose an alternative analysis, centred on the concept of revolution, which should be analysed both in its material aspects and in its ideal components.

Syria after independence

¶ Since its independence in 1946, Syria has been marked by a number of legacies from its long insertion within the Ottoman Empire, within which cities enjoyed political and economic ascendancy over the rural areas. The cities thus dominated their rural hinterlands and constituted primordial nodes of the international trading system linking Europe to Asia [1], notably the cities of Damascus and Aleppo, from which the political elites of the country all came, from independence, in 1946, until 1963.

¶ During this period, Syrian political life was articulated by a large number of military coups. In the meantime, the country was headed by two political groups: the Peoples' Party and the National Bloc, representative respectively of the interests of the bourgeoisie of Aleppo and Damascus. From 1958 to 1961, Syria and Egypt were united within the United Arab Republic, under the leadership of Nasser. The coming to power of the Baath party, following a new

military coup, in 1963, would mark the end of the political domination of the urban bourgeoisie, originating very predominantly from the Arab and Sunni Muslim population of the country for decades - and even, in some aspects, centuries, within the Ottoman Empire - and inaugurated a new era where the new regime was dominated by social forces from the rural and peripheral areas and by religious minorities, notably the Alawites [2]. The coup of 1963 may therefore, in many respects, be considered a response to the social crisis which affected the rural popular classes since independence, a reaction of the villages to the domination of the urban notables.

The policies of the radical wing of the Baath Party had appreciable socio-economic consequences from the late 1960s and early 1970s, in particular in favour of the most disadvantaged areas, to the detriment of the bourgeois merchant and industrial classes and the large landowners. Agrarian reform policies, nationalization and the creation of large public sectors put an end to the more rigid class inequalities, rooted in monopoly control of the means of production, by encouraging a broader access to economic opportunities and to property [3]. Sections of the agricultural proletariat and the small peasantry thus significantly benefited from agrarian reforms and the expansion of the public sector, and of the army and the bureaucracy in general.

â€¢ The consequences of this process converged in the economic and social consolidation of the rural middle class, while the redistribution of land put an end to the reign of very large land owners, as opposed to the middle (sometimes even rich) peasantry, that the new regime of the Baath could not weaken, since it was in large part derived from it. This position allowed this class in particular to take advantage of government subsidies and to broadly escape production controls [4].

The Baath before the takeover of power by Hafez al Assad in 1970

â€¢ How to analyze the phenomenon of the Baath in Syria? Since the country's independence, it recruited mainly in the rural areas, where the religious minorities are concentrated, mainly for historical reasons. It was therefore logical that the members of these communities predominated within the party. Its ideology also attracted religious minorities who expected that "socialism", Arab nationalism and secularism would help them escape their minority and hence subordinate status, and the narrow dependent social framework of their tribal and regional links [5].

â€¢ In 1963, the members of the Baath Party came from the rural middle-classes or even lower layers, thus enabling them to benefit from the social mobility afforded by the new state emerging from independence in 1946, in particular through the institution of the military. It should be added that it also received the support of a large fraction of the urban intelligentsia - teachers and civil servants mainly [6]. The new leadership of the Ba'ath, thus strongly radicalized in relation to its original founders, adopted a rhetoric close to that of the radical left and took a series of political decisions and measures aimed at preventing the return to power of the big urban bourgeoisie, merchant and industrial, as well as the large land owners: nationalization of a large part of private assets (1964-1965), in addition to the agrarian reform policies initiated at the time of the United Arab Republic (1958-1961) [7].

The big urban bourgeoisie - merchant and industrial - as well as the big landowners formed the spearhead of the coup of 1961, which put an end to the experience of the United Arab Republic, a regime that had threatened its economic and political power due to its policies of redistribution of wealth and land. The policy of Arab nationalism and the Ba'ath of the era was characterized by a state capitalism which promoted, on the one hand, a policy hostile to the national private sectors and foreign capital, and, on the other, a policy which had as its objective a vast redistribution of wealth within their societies. At the same time, any autonomy of the labour movement and any form of left and progressive opposition were violently repressed.

We will see that the arrival of Hafez al Assad put an end to the radical social policies of the 1960s to engage in the path of conciliation toward the bourgeois classes of society. This also corresponded to the loss of popularity of Arab nationalism after the defeat of June 1967 and the death of Nasser, in 1970.

The seizure of power by Hafez al-Assad in 1970 and the construction of a dictatorial and bourgeois regime

â€¢ The coming to power of Hafez al Assad in 1970 marked a new turning point for the country, decisive for the future decades. The new Syrian strong man was from the so-called “pragmatic” section of the Baath Party, which was not in favour of radical social policies and a confrontation with the conservative countries of the region, like the monarchies of the Gulf. The new regime was welcomed with great joy by the big bourgeoisie of the cities of Aleppo and Damascus. The big urban bourgeoisies, who had been very active against the left wing of the Ba'ath between 1963 and 1970, demonstrated in the streets of the major cities with banners of which one said, for example: “We implored the help of God - Al Madad. He sent us Hafiz al Assad” [8].

From this period, the government built a network of loyalties through various links, including economic ones, with persons from different religious ethnic and tribal communities. The beginning of the so-called “corrective movement” launched by Al Assad also put an end to the radical policies of the 1960s, which had questioned the heritage and the political power of the big bourgeoisie. The objective of Assad was to ensure the stability of his regime and the accumulation of capital by co-opting the most powerful sectors of the business community - the big traders, as well as a small group of big industrialists, concentrated mainly in the cities of Damascus and Aleppo, as well as the very big landowners, but also by gradually involving new bourgeois actors promised a rapid rise within the state apparatus.

The regime of Hafez al-Assad was an authoritarian regime that deprived of any legal existence political and social organizations that did not accept its exclusive domination or opposed its clientelist policies or practices - the massive corruption of the ruling class, political and military, was used primarily to ensure its loyalty. It was during this period, starting in 1970, that the new regime built an army which was completely subservient to the personal power of the dictator and his bodyguard. The war of 1973, presented as a victory by the Syrian regime, would also strengthen the control of Hafez al-Assad over the army. From this date, not a single bullet would be fired against the state of Israel from Syrian territory, although the Golan Heights remain occupied until today. The structure of the high command and elite corps was thus based on clientelism and confessionalism: the senior officers were recruited in the Alawite tribes, allied to the Assad family, to ensure their almost total allegiance to the state leadership.

Thanks to this close intertwining of public with private interests, the state became a real machine to accumulate considerable resources, a godsend for the nomenklatura, in particular the close circles of the supreme leader, his family and his most faithful lieutenants. The informal networks and the nepotism which bound the various sectors of the state with the business community have multiplied, giving birth to a “new class” of bourgeois rentiers: the impact of these changes has weighed heavy on the regressive developments of Syrian society, up to the eve of the revolution which began in 2011. The misallocation of resources and the proliferation of non-productive activities in the commercial sector, low in employment of labour but lucrative, have been the main consequences of these political, social and economic transformation.

â€¢ From 1986, the Syrian regime adopted the first measures of deregulation of its centralized “command” economy, at the price of important economic setbacks and a widespread failure of development, filled only by aid - a fraction of the oil rents – from the Gulf monarchies. In the same year, the crisis of the national currency was the sign of the accelerated consolidation of economic networks of the patronage built by the regime, although at an informal level.

From 1991, it came to largely dominate the economic areas presented abusively as part of the “private sector” , developed under the pretext of governmental reforms called “economic pluralism” (al -ta'addudiyya al iqtisadiyya) [9].

â€¢ This “new class”, organically linked to the state, needed to invest its wealth in the different sectors of the economy. Decree No. 10 (1991) thus constituted the springboard by means of which it was able to launder its accrued income [10]. This decree was intended to promote and encourage national and foreign private investment in sectors of activity which had been the monopoly of the public sector, such as the pharmaceutical industry, agriculture and agro-food, the hotel industry, and transport. It would facilitate investment in the private sector and open up possibilities of export-import thanks to tax cuts and other tax incentives, of course, always under the control of the state, rewarding its best placed members and deepening the system of widespread corruption. The transition from a command economy to crony capitalism was thus accelerated during the 1980s with the gradual abandonment of a centrally directed economy.

The 1990s have seen the emergence of a “new class” - new rich or a hybridized bourgeoisie - the result of a merger of the state bureaucracy and the survivors of the old “private” bourgeoisie, whose status owed nothing to the Baath regime, since it did not originate from collusion with it. We will analyze how this new class developed, in particular in an early phase, playing on its connections with the state, used as a cash cow to milk and promoter of a new economic direction by means of the gradual introduction of neoliberal policies of deregulation. In return, it has fully supported the regime's strategy by consolidating its power, particularly in the face of the fractions of the old private bourgeoisie.

The priority of repression and its functionality

â€¢ The advent of Hafez al Assad in power also marked a new era for Syria in terms of political, social and economic repression, marked by the establishment of the state of emergency, in 1963. This is reflected inter alia by a subtle policy of strengthening of the divisions within society between ethnic groups, communities and even tribes, which recalled certain practices of the French mandate, like the division of the country into five or six regional departments, above all according to communal criteria, with Druze and Alawite sub-groupings. The independent popular organizations - trade unions, professional groups (such as those of doctors, lawyers, engineers or pharmacists), civic associations and so on - were first monitored, and then repressed, and finally dissolved in 1980. They had been hitherto in the forefront of fighting for a return to democratic freedoms and the lifting of the state of emergency. In 1980, these organizations were replaced by structures placed under the direct control of the state [11]. The most bloody symbol of the repression of this regime remains however the massacres in the city of Hama, in 1982, by the security forces and the military, which reportedly caused the death of 10,000 to 40,000 persons. These killings in many respects indicated the provisional end of the bloody conflict between the supporters of the regime and the members of the Muslim Brotherhood who had taken up arms from the late 1970s.

â€¢ The repression also struck all the political parties who refused to submit to the diktat of Hafez al Assad and participate in the National Progressive Front (NPF), a coalition of forces owing allegiance to the regime. At the beginning of the 1970s, several secular parties, in particular of the left, had been the targets of the regime, including the February 23 Movement (a radical Baath tendency, close to the former president Salah Jadid), the League of Communist Action (Rabita al amal al shuyu'i), part of whose members came from the Alawite community and, to a lesser extent, the Communist Party of the political Bureau (CPPB) of Ryad Turk. The national gathering, which included various parties of the left, had also been severely repressed in the early 1980s [12]. During this decade, the Muslim Brotherhood was also affected strongly by the repression.

The regime thus imposed its total domination on key sectors of society, such as the universities and the army. It

banned all independent political activity, except of course that of the Baath Party, which was alone allowed to organize conferences and public demonstrations, from campuses to barracks, or publish and disseminate a newspaper. Even the political parties allied to it within the National Progressive Front did not have the right to organize, make propaganda or to have a small official presence in the public space. We will analyze later the specific role of the Baath party, in particular after the coming to power of Hafez al Assad. It is sufficient to note here that it controlled a wide range of corporatist, so-called popular, organizations, grouping peasants, youth, women and so on, through which many sectors of society have been placed under the tutelage of the regime.

â€¢ The role of the Ba'ath, thus transformed into an instrument of control of society, and thus deprived of any ideological dynamism, was therefore deeply changed with the arrival of Hafez al Assad in power. The organization of the party was changed, with the suppression of internal elections and their replacement by a system of designation from above, of co-option, decided by the regime and the security services, while the elements opposed to the policies of the regime were repressed. Rifaat Al-Assad, the brother of Hafez, has summarized his conception of the party thus during its 7th Regional Congress: "The leader decides, the party approves and the people applaud. It is thus that socialism operates in the Soviet Union. Who does not applaud, goes to Siberia" [13]. The party elites of the post-1970s have thus tended to become docile bureaucrats, while their comrades from the 1950s and 1960s were often dedicated and/or enthusiastic activists [14].

We see the ideals of unity, freedom and socialism, which were at the origin of the Baath, disappear from the real policies of the Assad regime to be invoked solely as rhetorical slogans. We will analyze also how the regime resorted to means other than repression to establish its power, including corruption, the instrumentalization of religion, dividing the Syrian population by ethnic groups, communities and so on. The weapon of confessionalism has developed in conjunction with the repression of the secular and liberal left opposition, popular civil organizations and political parties, while favouring "primary", so-called archaic identities, especially tribal ones.

â€¢ The death of the dictator Hafez al Assad, after a thirty year reign, had brought a wind of hope to Syria among broad sectors of society who hoped for a political opening, and particularly for the political opposition who wanted a democratic transition process through reforms. President Bashar al-Assad, son of Hafez, thus became president in 2000, and a few months of apparent promise followed, with a speech by the new president to parliament which called for "creative thinking" and recognized "the urgent need" for constructive criticism and reforms aimed at a certain modernization [15]. At the same time, the notorious political prison of Mezzeh in Damascus, a symbol of the brutal political repression of the regime, was closed, while a large number of political prisoners were released. Human rights organizations and forums for debate also began to multiply at the beginning of this new reign.

â€¢ Syrian civil society and political organizations were thus mobilized, from the beginning of 2001, calling for reforms and a democratization of the state. This was the meaning of the "declaration of 99" or the "Committee to revive civil society" (announced by a press release under the name of the "Declaration of 1000"), which comprised intellectuals, artists, writers, researchers and even the representatives of some political parties. At the same time, the parliamentarian and critic of the regime Riyadh Seif announced the formation of the Social Movement for Peace. The regime responded quickly faced with these developments by repression and by counter-attacking brutally at the rhetorical level, by means of the press, or even physically, by the arrest of activists. At the end of summer 2001, eight of the most prominent leaders of civil society were imprisoned, and all the forums for debates, with the exception of one, were closed [16].

â€¢ Between 2004 and 2006 a wave of sit-ins developed, at the initiative of young political activists and civil society organizations, on various issues relating to democratic rights, such as freedom of expression and/or assembly, a new phenomenon in Syria. In 2004, the Kurdish uprising, which had started in the town of Qamichli and had spread in the predominantly Kurdish regions throughout the country - Jazira, Afrin -, but also in Aleppo and Damascus, was severely repressed by the security forces, with the regime also appealing for the collaboration of the Arab tribes of the Northeast. Many activists were arrested or killed, more than 2,000, while others were forced to leave the country [17]. Basic democratic rights were therefore non-existent on the eve of the Syrian uprising of March 2011, whereas

the announced reforms were still awaited.

The acceleration of neo-liberal policies and the growth of social inequality

Since the accession to power of President Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian regime has increased and accelerated the implementation of neo-liberal economic policies. The latter have benefited in particular a small oligarchy which has proliferated since the era of his father, because of its mastery of the networks of economic patronage and their loyal customers. Bashar al-Assad's cousin, Rami Makhlouf, as we will see later, perfectly embodies this mafia-like process of privatization conducted by the regime in favour of its own.

New monopolies have been created in the hands of Bashar's family while the quality of goods and services has decreased, particularly in the health sector and education where private institutions have multiplied. At the same time the financial sector has developed with the growth, from 2004, of the first private banks, dominated by Syrian capital and the Gulf oil monarchies, of insurance companies, the Stock Exchange of Damascus and bureaux de change. The coming to power of Bashar has however restricted the circle of those who enjoyed the "spoils" of the regime; these were distributed more widely under his father, when several groups could conclude business and win the favour of the state.

â€¢ The son of a former commander of the Syrian Republican Guard and second cousin of the new dictator, Makhlouf thus controlled, on the eve of the uprising of 2011, nearly 60% of the economy of the country, thanks to a complex network of holdings [18]. His economic empire includes telecommunications, oil and gas, as well as construction, banks, airlines and retail. He is also owner of the only duty free firm, as well as several private schools to which the children of the dignitaries of the regime and of the Syrian bourgeoisie are sent. The personal fortune of Rami Makhlouf is estimated at close to 6 billion dollars [19]. It is to be noted that at the beginning of 2011, the British magazine "World Finance" had extolled Makhlouf's visionary leadership and his outstanding contribution to the Syrian economy, calling him a symbol of the positive change at work in the country. The Chilean case provides a good illustration of the link between neo-liberal policies and political dictatorship in the countries of the periphery.

â€¢ The neo-liberal policies of the regime have satisfied various social sectors: the upper layers of the new bourgeoisie, which had developed within the state during the previous decades; the old bourgeois elites of the private sector, who had begun to invest again in the country; and foreign investors, in particular in the Gulf region, by opening the Syrian economy to their operations at the expense of the majority of the population, hit hard by continuous inflation. The neo-liberal policies put in place during these last ten years have caused the collapse of the public sector and led to the domination of the private sector, which now accounts for nearly 70 per cent of economic activity [20].

To better reflect the impact of these economic policies and of their role in the triggering of the popular uprising, it is necessary to look also at the sectors that have benefited from these policies, be it the leaders of the security service and army apparatuses; the networks of the bureaucracy; the crony capitalists sponsored by different sectors of the public services, who have developed and enriched themselves still more within the private sector, particularly in the course of the 1990s, after the implementation of investment laws Number 10 of 1991 ; and the bourgeoisie of Aleppo and Damascus, which has benefited more particularly from the launch of the so-called "social market economy" in 2005 .

â€¢ The growth of real GDP and real per capita income has decreased since the early 1990s. The process of economic liberalization has created an ever growing inequality within the country. The poorest people have difficulty

in coping with this new economy due to a growing shortage of jobs, especially for the young graduates and the inhabitants of the peripheral regions, while the middle class, in particular civil servants and young people finishing their studies, are quickly approaching the threshold of poverty because their incomes have not kept pace with inflation, which reached 17 %, officially, in 2008 [21].

â€œ On the eve of the uprising of March 2011, the unemployment rate stood at 14.9%, according to official figures - 20-25% according to other sources; it was respectively 33.7% and 39.3% among those aged 20-24 and 15-19 years [22]. In 2007, the percentage of Syrians living below the poverty line was 33 %, which represented approximately seven million people, while 30% of them were just above this level [23]. The proportion of poor is higher in rural areas (62 %) than in urban areas (38 %). Poverty is more widespread, more rooted and more marked (58.1 %) in the northwest and northeast (the provinces of Idleb, Aleppo, Raqqa, Deir Ezzor and Hassakeh), where 45% of the population lives [24].

â€œ In addition, the Syrian regime undertook to reform its system of subsidies, penalizing even more the popular classes and the poorest, while privatisations have proliferated. This is accompanied by the reduction of the quality and quantity of public health services, which has forced the people to turn to the dearer private sector in order to enjoy basic services. The report conducted by the IMF in 2010 welcomed the many measures taken by the Syrian regime: “the unification of the exchange rate and the restrictions on access to foreign exchange for current account transactions appear to have been mostly eliminated. The private banks now lead the growth of the financial sector, and the Damascus stock exchange has recently reopened after a closure of 40 years. Taxes have been simplified and the trade regime has been significantly liberalized” [25].

â€œ The development plan of the Syrian regime from 2006 to 2010 had the stated aim of “continuation of the deregulation of the market, as well as the deepening and the growth of its inclusion in the world to attract private investment, with extensive structural reforms in order to ensure a good governance of the economy and an equitable growth” [26].

â€œ Syria's economic growth, which was on average 5% during the years preceding the beginning of the uprising, has not benefited the working classes; in fact, inequalities in terms of wealth have continued to increase. For example, between 1997 and 2004, the Gini coefficient rose from 0.33 to 0.37 [27]. In 2003-2004, 20% of the poorest accounted for only 7% of total expenditure, while 20% of the richest were responsible for 45% of the latter [28]. A trend which has continued to grow up to the outbreak of the revolution.

â€œ In agriculture, the privatization of land at the expense of several hundreds of thousands of peasants from the north-east, from 2008, because of drought, should not be perceived as the consequence of a simple natural disaster. The growth and intensification of the exploitation of the land by big agribusiness companies - including lands previously retained for grazing, and even the illegal drilling of wells -, as well as the establishment of lines of selective water meeting the requirements of the new major owners - facilitated the corruption of the local administration which accompanied the agricultural crisis. In 2008, 28% of farmers were exploiting 75% of irrigated land, while 49% of them had only 10% of the latter, which is evidence of the progress of inequalities within agriculture [29].

In the same way, the regime has imposed its domination on the trade union bureaucracy, and this has hampered the fight against neo-liberal and authoritarian policies, particularly since 2000. The standard of living of the majority of the population continued to decrease, whereas political repression continued. For example, in May 2006, hundreds of workers protested within the public construction company in Damascus and clashed with security forces. At the same time, taxi drivers went on strike to Aleppo to protest against their conditions of work and life.

â€œ The neo-liberal reforms of the regime have encouraged a policy based on foreign direct investment, which went from \$120 million in 2002 to \$3.5 billion in 2010 [30], particularly in the areas of export, services, and tourism. Before being shattered by the events which began in March 2011, the latter had become a flourishing industry: it represents

12% of current GDP, or approximately 6.5 billion dollars, and employs 11% of the labour force [31]

The absence of democracy and the growing impoverishment of large parts of Syrian society, in a climate of corruption and increasing social inequality, prepared the ground for the popular insurrection, which thus needed no more than a spark. As Bashar al-Assad put it at the end of January 2011, in an interview with the “Wall Street Journal”: “Despite more difficult circumstances than in most Arab countries, Syria is stable. Why? Because you must be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people” [32]. The Syrian leader was very wrong, as he would gradually find out.

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