

Freedom Counts

The Project For Identifying, Assessing & Quantifying Obstacles To The Process Of Democratization In Syria: The Basic Outlines

Ammar Abdulhamid

Introduction

In my country, Syria, the older generation of intellectuals often bemoans the demise of the “very promising democratic experience” of the late fifties, an experience forcefully aborted through the Baath Party coup of 1963, and, later, through the internal Baath coup of 1970, known as the Corrective Movement.

However, the success of the coups themselves, the fact that the sole opposition to these coups came out of Nasserist, communist and fundamentalist groups (that is, from other ideological groups), the constant fragmentation of these groups, and the role that religious and ethnic minorities played in all this, testify, if anything, to the absence of any deep appreciation of liberal democratic and civil values, on a mass level at the very least.

Thus, the result of the two Baath coups was a reversion into the traditional cultural mode of deeply-ingrained political apathy, and a re-strengthening in the people’s psyche of the deep dichotomy that traditionally existed between ruler and ruled. A short period of democratic experimentation from the top coming in response to the expectations of a small class of intellectuals, professionals, and their zealous adolescent followers,¹ was, unsurprisingly, insufficient to challenge and change the basic cultural underpinnings of how legitimacy is gained in the Arab world with regard to political authority.

Some might, and do indeed, argue that, had the said experiment lasted longer, it would have created the necessary conditions for cultural change and, thus, for successful democratization of the country. But this is quite a simplistic argument. In reality, this experiment, as we have noted, did not succeed due to the lack of a real appreciation of democratic ideals among the intellectual and professional classes themselves, coupled with an equally fateful lack of grass-roots support for democratic experimentation, the importance and necessity of which had yet to seep into “popular imagination”.² In an environment where there is no popular endorsement of democracy and democratic institutions, democratic experimentation from the top, no matter how sincere it happens to be, is bound to fail.

For democracy, in the final analysis, is the product of “negotiations” between ruling and ruled classes through the application of grass-roots pressure to obtain concessions from the “top”. It cannot take place any other way, it cannot be handed over on a silver platter and cannot be achieved in one single coup de grace.

If the experience of the developed part of the world teaches us anything, it is that democracy is a continuous process, and that, as soon as the people show any apathy towards the political process, the rulers almost immediately succumb to the temptation of autocratic practices.

Even in the best of times, the ruling class attempts to extend its authority through a number of methods pertaining to the dissemination of information: access to information could be denied in certain cases under the guise of national security, or too much information could be provided so as to hide the facts in tons of meaningless details. Occasionally, especially in times of war or preparation for war, disinformation provides a powerful tool, not only for deceiving the enemy, but also for deceiving one's own people as well, luring them into supporting certain actions they may not otherwise be inclined to support.

Democracy, then, is quite problematic even in the most developed and seemingly democratic of countries. Questions pertaining to whether democracy can flourish in times of poverty and economic crises, not to mention times of war, are all too legitimate questions to ask here. Western experience in this regard is ambivalent to say the least. And apathy is a notable phenomenon even in the western world.

But while western apathy is the result of a relative affluence, in the Middle East, it emanates from the persistence of a medieval cosmology or worldview, that is, from the continuing prevalence of certain cultural and intellectual idiosyncrasies that have not been internally challenged yet on a broad enough scale. For, though it is true that the challenges posed by modernity have rocked the faith of the peoples in the Middle East (the Arab world in particular) to its very foundations, the fact remains that, because modernity was introduced from external sources and was not the result of internal socio-economic and political dynamics, it was met by grass-roots rejection and a reversion to traditional modes of thoughts and organization, a phenomenon that was later ideologized, giving birth to various forms and manifestations of Islamic fundamentalism, among other isms.

Indeed, Modernity itself seems to have imposed itself upon the Middle East, in the form of various isms, such as Arab or Syrian nationalism, Socialism, Communism, Baathism, etc.³ This development, naturally, made matters even worse. For ideologies in their very nature, and regardless of where they had first been conceptualized, cannot accommodate democracy. Thus, Modernity itself, in the form of *Modernism*, that is, in its ideologized form, seems to have helped thwart the possibility of establishing viable democracies in the region, at least in the short and intermediate term.

For all these reasons, the region was, and continues to be, caught up in a tragicomic dilemma of sorts, where the very possibility of democratization is impeded by all actors, internal and external, albeit armed with promises of freedom and progress. Considering all this, it would be an understatement indeed to say that the challenge of democracy-building in the Middle East will not be easily met. But, for the interest of freedom and human dignity, if these things still mean anything today, the challenge must be met, regardless of the odds.

This is indeed what *Project Freedom Counts* is trying to help accomplish in connection to one Middle East Arab country, namely Syria.

Research Problematic

Project Freedom Counts has been envisioned as part of an overall regional project seeking to determine the Global and Regional Influences on the Democratization Process in South Caucasus, Central and West Asia. *Project Freedom Counts* will focus in particular on Syria and will be conducted by Etana Press, a Syrian publishing house acting as an unofficial NGO concerned with civil society development in the country.

The *Project* is still in the initial phase. The formation of a proper research team and the establishment of a more detailed work plan are still pending, as funding applications to various institutions are still being considered. But, we expect that the *Project* will be officially launched before the end of 2003.

The *Project* will attempt to identify and measure the impact of various internal and external factors and constraints influencing the process of democratization in Syria. Special attention, however, will be given to internal factors, since they have often been neglected in previous related studies, or treated in an all too broad and general manner, leading to a failure in the production of vital statistics and indices that can help bring matters into greater focus.

Moreover, the impact of the Arab-Israeli struggle and the current American interventionism in the region will not be directly considered in the *Project*, seeing that enough studies, articles, books, and monographs dealing with these issues have already been published. Still, and while one can point to a lack of vital statistics in this area as well, addressing this issue is simply too large an undertaking and should be the subject of an all together separate project.

Nonetheless, one of the studies that will be commissioned as part of *Project Freedom Counts* will focus on popular perceptions of the regional and global situations, and will, therefore, provide some coverage of the "perceived" impact of certain regional and international developments, including the Arab-Israeli struggle and American interventionism, on the process of regional democratization.

Research Dynamics

Project Freedom Counts will consist of three separate yet interrelated phases, each lasting for a year:

- **Phase One** will involve the commissioning of special studies on a number of specific factors (listed below) to be conducted by researchers operating individually and conducting their own research and field studies, within the limits of the allocated budgets.
- **Phase Two** calls for the establishment of a special team of experts (involving some but not all of the researchers above) who will work to create certain questionnaires based on Phase One studies. The questionnaires will be completed with the help of special groups of volunteers operating all over the country. The idea is to poll a critical number of "average citizens", chosen randomly, on the issues outlined in Phase One studies, in the hope of producing statistics and indices that can either support or throw doubts on the various conclusions reached in

these studies.⁴ The length of Phase Two is mostly due to the fact that polling activities are frowned upon by the Syrian regime, and will have to take place quietly.

- **Phase Three** will involve the following activities:
 1. generating statistics on the basis of the questionnaires completed in Phase Two,
 2. amending Phase One studies on the basis of the new statistics,
 3. disseminating the results of the overall study through the establishment of a special website, in print form, and through special informal workshops and forums aimed at civil activists in the country and the region as a whole.⁵

The Studies

The studies that will be conducted during Phase One will focus on the following topics, each posing its own specific set of challenges to the process of democratization:

1. Describing the contemporary political culture, and providing a historical framework for the current internal political situation.
2. Outlining the role of the army in contemporary political life.
3. Identifying the various constitutional and legal constraints.
4. Identifying the various constraints posed by existing religious traditions, institutions and laws, and assessing the role of existing folk culture on understanding such concepts as democratization and civil society.
5. Assessing the impact of macroeconomic factors, especially with regard to the oil and natural gas sector.
6. Assessing the impact of microeconomic factors, especially the role of small and medium enterprises (SMEs).
7. Assessing the impact of the rural-urban divide.
8. Assessing the role of the status of women in society.
9. Assessing the role of the existing educational system.
10. Assessing the role of the sectarian and ethnic makeup of the country.

1) The making of the contemporary political culture in Syria

Many factors enter into the making of the political culture in modern Syria. In fact, many of these factors are listed below and will be considered separately. Still, an overview can always help put things into a larger and clearer perspective. Although this first study may not directly lead to the generation of statistics, it will, nonetheless, help clarify the approach and can help underscore the various questions and issues that need to be addressed in the other more specific studies. This is why this study will be conducted first and will be discussed in a special informal meeting of experts that will mark the launching in earnest of *Project Freedom Counts*.

2) The role of the army

Any observer of contemporary Syria will be able to tell that the army plays a very central role in managing the affairs of the state. In fact, the country is ruled by a military junta derived mostly from the country's minority Alawi sect. The role of this shadow government became increasingly more crucial and problematic in the

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aftermath of the passing of Syria's late president, Hafiz Al-Assad, on 10 June 2000, and the appointment of his son, Bashar Al-Assad, as his successor.

The young president, however, is believed by most observers to be only a figurehead, with the actual power residing in the hands of a small group of army generals who are struggling amongst themselves for control over the country. The struggle continues unresolved to date, putting the country in stasis, with various reform laws (mostly economic in nature) being occasionally issued but often not implemented.

This situation is not exactly new. Armies, often composed of ethnic and religious minorities, have always played an important role in the shaping of Syrian political life and culture, a fact that goes a long way in explaining the prevailing popular political apathy.

Still, the situation has never been quantified. That is, we do not have any statistics that can show, for instance, whether the current situation exists due to a lack of a deep enough popular civil awareness, or whether popular disdain of the current regime does indeed reflect an actual sense of frustration vis-à-vis army and/or minority rule.

The study focusing on the role of the army in contemporary political life in Syria should, therefore, conclude by attempting, among other things, to formulate certain questions that can help measure the popular understanding of the "natural" role that armies should play in modern states and societies.

3) The constitutional and legal constraints

The Syrian constitution was revised a number of times since the country's independence on April 17, 1946. The most drastic constitutional change, however, took place in the aftermath of the Corrective Movement, which led to the introduction of a new socialist constitution that was ratified in a popular referendum in 1973.

As is the case with socialist constitutions, the Baath-introduced document is rife with paradoxical articles that both promise to safeguard basic freedoms while simultaneously working to nullify them by linking them to the ever so vague and expansive interests of the "masses".

This notwithstanding, the constitution itself remained a meaningless document, as the country continued (and continues still) to live under the state of emergency first declared in 1963 in the aftermath of the Baathist coup.

The first major legal constraint to the process of democratization that needs to be addressed in this regard is, therefore, the lifting of the state of emergency itself. For only then could one truly begin to grapple with the process of constitutional and legal reforms. There are no indications, however, that such a development is likely for the foreseeable future.

As for the judicial system, it is indeed quite corrupt, inefficient, and far from being independent (constitutional assertions to this effect notwithstanding). But, one has to ask, is there really enough popular awareness of the need to maintain an independent judiciary? And how deep an inroad did the very notion of equality before the law and constitutionalism make in connection to popular understanding? These are some of the questions that need to be examined.

4) The role of the religious culture

Such is the hold of religion and religious traditions over the minds of the people of Syria that even the 1973 constitution, introduced and imposed by a supposedly secular regime, could not but assign a role to the Islamic Shariah in the law-making process in the country, treating it as one of the main sources of legislation. Still, the constitution fell short of declaring Islam as the official religion of the state, as is the case in most other Arab countries.

This created a paradoxical situation where the country could simultaneously be considered as both secular and Islamic. Secular, because it was in effect declared socialist. Islamic, because religious law still regulated major sections of civil life: including marriages, divorces, custody rights and inheritance laws, among other things.

More importantly, the political situation in the country in the mid seventies and early eighties virtually voided any attempt at introducing civil laws to replace the existing religious ones. The violent clashes that took place between the military junta and the extremist Muslim Brotherhood Movement created a climate that would have proved, by government reckoning at least, quite inimical for the introduction of civil laws.

Popular culture, on the other hand, is influenced by many factors, and not only religious traditions. Popular interpretations of religion, and popular vistas onto internal, regional and global affairs can also establish certain constraints with regard to disseminating notions of a civil nature.

To which degree do religious values serve to impede the process of civil society building and democratization in the country? And what is the role of popular culture in this regard? These are some of the questions that the study on the role of religions and popular culture will attempt to answer.

5) Macroeconomic considerations

The issue of macroeconomic consideration relates in particular to the way the country's oil and natural gas supplies are being handled by the government and the sort of impact they had over such issues as corruption, centralization and openness to criticism.

If the government's handling of the oil supply over the last three decades is any indication, we can only conclude that Syria's natural wealth is in many ways a major obstacle to democratization. For the oil wealth has been run over the last three decades as a family affair, and corruption in the oil sector is rife. In fact, only with the accession of Syria's new president to power did oil revenue appear as part of the country's national budget. Prior to that, no public discussion or mention of this issue was permitted.

Even now government facts and figures in this regard are offered without comments or explanation. Moreover, the fact that the oil reserves in the country are dwindling receives only a casual mention, with the discovery of huge natural gas reserves in central Syria serving to offset and alleviate any related fears, public or private.

This discovery, however, and on the basis of the aforementioned oil experience and the government's continued rejection of any public questioning of its conduct and any kind of public accountability in general, promises, if anything, to make matters even worse in the future. The greed factor is simply too strong in this regard.

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Furthermore, and due to the absence of accurate official records and estimates with regard to the handling of the oil and natural gas supply in the country, one can only rely on the guesstimates of various scholars. For this reason, our study will focus more on measuring the popular perception of the government's handling of the country's oil wealth, an issue that may not prove any less important than the reality involved.

6) Microeconomic considerations

One of the main assumptions underlying the entire Project is the belief in a linkage between the process of democratization and the shift towards a more market-oriented economy. Privatization, or at least encouraging a greater contribution by the private sector to the GDP, is seen as a corollary to the shift towards free market economics.

The study here will, therefore, attempt to assess the seriousness of the Syrian government's commitment to allowing the private sector, and hence SMEs, to play a greater role in the country's economic activities. The nature of the recent reforms will be discussed and the various areas where changes, legal and/or procedural, have been introduced will be monitored and the impact of the changes will be assessed.

The government's commitment to joining such international organizations and agreements as the World Trade Organization and the Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreement will also be considered.

In the meantime, current indicators divulge a lack of serious commitment to economic reforms. The very concept of privatization is still being dismissed, to the degree that no discussion on the subject is actually allowed to take place. Even the one year old yet-to-be-implemented law allowing for the establishment of private banks imposes simply too many restrictions on the operations of these banks to the extent that most experts have already expressed grave doubts regarding their eventual viability.

The fact that Lebanese banks seem to be the only ones interested in opening branches for themselves in Syria at this time speaks volumes about the matter. For Lebanese banks, due to the prolonged Syrian military presence in their country, have long succumbed to the dabbling and influence of Syrian army generals, many of whom can be considered as the *de facto* owners of these banks. As such, the new private banks will come as another extension of the ruling regime's reach into the pocket of the ordinary citizens, and should not, therefore, be construed as a real sign of openness.

Indeed, this tendency to economic and financial castration seems to doom *a priori* the great majority of reforms introduced by the Syrian government. Nonetheless, attempting to quantify the situation will allow us to leave all these generalizations behind and will enable us to present a more clear picture of the overall economic situation in the country on the micro level.

The study should also attempt to determine whether there is a real public understanding of such issues as privatization, accountability, and supporting the role of SMEs and SME development in the economy, etc.

7) The Rural-Urban Divide

Is democratization viable when half of the population of the country is living in backward rural communities growing in an unplanned manner and under the shadow of continuing governmental neglect?

One might be tempted here to cite the case of India as proof positive that, even in situations where the rural-urban divide is quite great and visible, democratization is still possible. This assertion, however, in itself raises a host of related questions, the most important of which perhaps pertaining to the very legitimacy of making a comparison between the situations in Syria and India, two very politically, economically, socially and culturally distinct countries.

Still, the answer here seems to be more complex than to allow for the adoption of all too facile assumptions and assertions. What is needed is a more scientific approach that can help determine the readiness of rural populations to accept the basic notions involved in democratization and civil society building.

The study here should attempt to explore potential popular receptivity to a trade-off of sorts, whereby greater governmental concern and support of the local communities could offset the potential impact of introducing some liberal laws touching upon religious and societal mores and traditions.

8) Women's Issues

Can democratization take place without seriously addressing the need for improving women's status in the country and supporting the case for gender equality? The obvious answer here is 'No'. But, then, one can cite the India example here as well.

What should be obvious, however, is that democratization as a process can begin without completely resolving such issues. For the resolution of these issues is indeed part of the process itself. After all, we are not talking about a package deal but about a process, most likely a very long one.

Still, listing the legal and social obstacles standing in the way of women's empowerment can help put things into a clearer perspective. So can the attempt to generate more accurate statistics on such issues as public attitude towards socially and politically active women and women in positions of power and authority. For, despite the fact that Syria is a country where women can be ministers and parliament members, no actual statistics measuring popular attitude towards this phenomenon are currently available.

Other issues where statistics could also be of help in this regard involve attempts to measure popular understanding (and potential reaction) to issues such as civil marriage, allowing women an equal share in inheritance law, and female circumcision (not widespread in Syria).

9) Education

Over the last three decades, Syrian children and adolescents have been almost systematically deprived of the benefits of a humanist educational system. All governmental priorities were given, verbal assurances and promises aside, to maintaining and strengthening the hold of the current regime on power and, allegedly, to meeting the various challenges posed by the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The result has been a mediocre and outmoded educational system based on traditional learning and rote memorization. There is nothing in the current

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curricula that could help foster civil and democratic values. On the contrary, the students' minds are being filled with two kinds of ideologies, socialist and Islamist (Islamic and socialists studies being part of the curriculum since childhood).

The emphasis on rote memorization is another way to stifle the spirit of inquiry among students. Teachers' attitudes also play a negative role here, since teachers are underpaid and have to take on an enormous workload. For this reason, teachers are often unready to deal with bright and inquisitive students.

Corruption, favouritism, nepotism, sectarianism and the continuing dabbling by the Baath Party apparatus in the educational system have led over the years to the further degradation of the system by driving away its able and dedicated cadres and stuffing it with unqualified teachers and administrators.

Still, to which degree does the educational system help mould the thinking and identity of the students? Here lies the main focus of the study, which will attempt to generate a list of questionnaires that will help provide some statistical data gauging the role of the school system in the processes of identity formation and creating generations that are (more) receptive to democratic ideals.

10) The Ethnic and Sectarian Question

Despite the fact that more than 80% of Syria's population are Sunni Muslims and of Arab descent, the population of Syria is often considered too diverse in terms of its religious, sectarian and ethnic makeup.

This sense of diversity seems to be based on the fact that each major minority sect or ethnic group (most notably the Kurds) seems to occupy a distinct geographic area. For example, the Alawites are located mostly in the Lattakia mountains in North Syria, the Druzes in the southern mountains, the Christians in the central valley (known as the Valley of the Christians) and the Kurds, with the diversity of their religious sects, in the northeastern parts of the country along the Iraqi and Turkish borders. Of course, this picture is not very accurate, for all major religious sects tend to be heavily represented in Damascus, and the Christians and Alawites have strong presence in all major Syrian cities as well, especially Aleppo.

The issue of minority rights, therefore, is one question that Syrians need to address as part of any democratization process.

For, despite the fact that violent episodes are a rarity in contemporary Syrian history with regard to inter-communal relations, mutual acceptance has yet to be achieved. Its secular pretensions and the fact that its founders were Christians notwithstanding, the Baath Party leadership fell under Alawite control shortly after the formation of the Party.

The Baath coups, especially that of 1970, brought Alawites to power in Syria for the first time in their history. The continuing dependence of the regime on its Alawite base of support especially in the army, shows very clearly that the situation of minority rule is far from being addressed, not to mention resolved, at this stage.

Another important consideration here is the Kurdish question. Indeed, can Syria move towards democracy without addressing the rights of its Kurdish minority? Many of Syria's Kurds are living without any proper identification cards, and the various Syrian governments, ever since independence, have always been wary about the intentions of the Kurdish population.

Various containment policies have been used in this regard, including the creation of an "Arab belt" to surround and isolate Kurdish areas, a policy that eventually proved a failure. Conversely, more and more Kurds continue to move from Turkey and Iraq into Syrian held territories, buying up lands from Christians who, at one point in the late eighties and early nineties, were emigrating en masse to Sweden and the Benelux countries, depicting themselves as refugees fleeing religious persecution.

The current situation in Iraq will probably raise the issue of Syria's Kurds again. Though, it has to be noted that Syria's Kurds, for the most part, are not demanding independence or even autonomy, but, paradoxically enough, Syrian citizenship for those that are still deprived of it, certain cultural rights, and an end to governmental negligence of their territories.

Conclusion

The whole issue of the sectarian and ethnic makeup of the country seems to be related to an even larger question, namely: do Syrians accept and identify with the current borders of their country? After all, the borders were created by the French and the British through the Sykes-Picot agreement and not by the Syrians, regardless of how they might define themselves.

In a sense, the whole process of democratization seems to be related to this important issue of "national" identity (of course, this applies to other countries in the Middle East as well). *Project Freedom Counts* will therefore be addressing issues that go to the heart of Syria's future and promises to set the grounds for more research efforts and studies to be commissioned at a later date. Should its results be heeded by the government, it could help address some of the country's basic political, economic, and socio-cultural problems.

Admittedly though, this last point depends a lot on the government's desire to change and its readiness to pay the price for change in terms of loss of "absolute" control over a whole range of issues and institutions, and becoming more and more publicly accountable. No less important in this regard, of course, is the readiness of the Syrian people to begin clamouring for the rights, abandoning their traditional apathy and quietism and showing the necessary resolve to face the necessary governmental crackdown.

Finally, nothing could indeed be achieved these days without the involvement of external pressures upon the Syrian government demanding, if not downright imposing, change. These pressures could come within the framework of ongoing Syrian-European Association negotiations (Syria is expected to sign the Agreement sometime in 2003) and the recently declared US-Middle East Partnership Initiative.

ENDNOTES

¹ Most of which were simply too ideological, or prone to ideological thinking, to reflect in their behaviour a true appreciation of democratic ideals.

² A problem related to the failure of the intellectuals to address the "masses" and to their disdain of these masses, on whose behalf they, paradoxically, often spoke.

³ And let's not forget in this regard the role of colonialism and imperialism which had, of course, paved the way for the aforementioned isms.

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⁴ Hence the insistence on including only some of the researchers involved in Phase One, since they might tend to be biased towards supporting their own conclusions.

⁵ This insistence on informality is meant to alleviate any potential backlash by the Syrian authorities.

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