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## Is Assad capable of reform?

BY VOLKER PERTHES

Following the first recent wave of protests in the Syrian city of Dara'a earlier this month, President Bashar al-Assad's office said he was considering lifting the emergency law and enacting a party law. On Tuesday, the president dismissed his cabinet.

Unlike some foreign observers, Syrians are not impressed. Changing the ministers is a meaningless gesture unless it's followed by real reform, and Syrians have heard promises of reform too often. The idea of a new party law in particular has come up whenever the regime is under pressure — for example in 2000, after Assad took power, or in 2005, after Syria's forced withdrawal from Lebanon. What has followed demonstrated how far the regime is prepared to go — or more accurately not to go — when it speaks of reform.

I remember a meeting I had five years ago with Faisal Kalthoum, a professor of law and at the time a confidant to Assad, who proudly told me about a draft party law he and other members of a special committee had just finalized. (Kalthoum, who regarded himself as a reformer, later became governor of Dara'a and was in that position until he was fired after the first bloody crackdown.)

The new law, he told me at that time, would allow parties of various tendencies to be established. But there was no intention, he added when I asked, to change the Constitution, particularly Article 8, which states that the Baath Party is the "leading party in the society and the state." In other words, parties could be freely constituted so long as they did not challenge the Baath's monopoly on power. It is hardly necessary to add that Assad did not enact the law. The situation, other officials told me in subsequent years, "wasn't yet considered ripe" for such a reform.

I would be positively astonished if Assad was prepared today not only to enact that law, but also to lift the state of emergency and rescind Article 8. He could make history with such moves, probably setting the stage for a step-by-step political liberalization in Syria — for which, I assume, a small window of time still exists. But I doubt he will do it.

This is mainly because Assad, in contrast to the image of him that some Western leaders have developed, is not a reformer. He can more correctly be described as a modernizer. When he inherited power from his father in 2000 he set out to modernize the system — the economic and technological foundation as well as the political, security and bureaucratic elite on which he bases his power.

He allowed archaic economic and trade regulations to be shelved, private banks to operate, foreign investments to come in, mobile-phone companies to operate. And, starting with regional party leaders and governors, then ministers, and finally the top echelons of the security apparatus, he managed within only a couple of years to remove his father's old guard and replace it with people loyal to himself.

In doing so, he gave Syria a more modern face and made some things work more efficiently, but he also made sure that the basic system — which relies on the heavy hand of the security services, on personal ties, and on a form of tolerated corruption that allows loyalists to enrich themselves — remained intact.

Initially, after his assumption of power, Assad encouraged a somewhat freer political debate. But in 2001, after a short-lived “Damascus Spring,” the regime cracked down on many of the intellectuals who had participated in that debate and who thought that it was really the beginning of a political opening. Many have been arrested repeatedly over the past decade.

To be fair, Assad has not relied only on repression and cronies. Unlike Hosni Mubarak or Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, the relatively young Syrian leader did gain some real popularity. The regional situation has helped him, as he quite frankly admitted in a recent interview with the Wall Street Journal. He was extremely critical of the U.S. invasion in Iraq, rightly warned of chaos after an externally enforced regime change there, and gained a reputation for saying no to the United States.

He was compelled to withdraw his forces from Lebanon, but managed, after a period of weakness, to make the best of it by opening up the economy in Syria, thereby reducing the reliance of Syrian businessmen on Lebanon, and gradually rebuilding Syrian political influence in Lebanon.

He denounced American and Israeli policies toward the Palestinians, while at the same time making clear that Syria would not block a peace treaty with Israel. All this made him for some time among the most popular heads of state in the Arab world, and, to the extent that it can be judged, at home.

This apparent popularity may have led him and his advisers to ignore the fact that even in Syria, many people were angry and frustrated with a repressive regime, bad governance and blatant corruption.

In Syria, as in other Arab countries, there is a widely shared feeling, particularly among those between 20 and 30, that the regime denies them dignity and a fair chance to participate in politics and the economy. Offering cosmetic reforms now is likely to be too little too late.

Assad may find that while it was relatively easy to deal with intellectuals and activists, it is far harder to restrain an entire generation.

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