

indoctrinating them in Arab nationalism. The regime sought to legitimise Syria's separate statehood by its mission as the champion of the Arab cause against Israel, the one element of the regime's policy on which a broad consensus existed, and its credible performance against Israel, at least by comparison to other Arab states, was perhaps its major source of legitimacy. On the other hand, the cohesion of the regime centre was based to a considerable degree on sub-state Alawi solidarity. Despite the potential contradictions between the logics of these two levels of identity, it was, given the power of sub- and trans-state loyalties in Syria, perhaps inevitable, as well as ironic that these should be harnessed to state building ends.

VI. CONCLUSION

In summary, Asad built authority through a complex mix of techniques and strategies. "Traditional" techniques with long roots in the political culture, notably the primordial political cement of kin and sectarian *asabiya*, were used to forge a reliable elite core dominating the state. "Modern" political technology – party ideology, organisation, bureaucratic control, and modern means of coercion and surveillance – consolidated control over society. The special features of the regime were, perhaps, its distinctive combination of sect and party to control the military and mobilize a rural base. The incorporation of a significant array of interests – the army and the minorities as well as sections of key social forces, including the bourgeoisie, the salaried middle class, the peasantry and the working class, gave the regime a cross-class, urban-rural social base. Popular legitimacy rested on Arabism and a "populist" social contract. At the top, Asad achieved relative Bonapartist-like autonomy, balancing between competing groups and social forces. Bonapartism was a function of the favourable social terrain created by the levelling of rival sources of social power through revolution from above and of the new patronage deriving from the much increased post-1973 access to rent (Hinnebusch 1990; Perthes 1995: 187–190).

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Chapter 5

STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONS UNDER ASAD

The Ba'th state never achieved the totalitarian penetration and control of society implicit in its Leninist model and its autonomy was being contested even as it was being asserted. First, the state began to generate a new dominant class bridging the state and private sectors with its own distinct interests. The corruption and inequality resulting from this process spawned a violent Islamic opposition among those damaged. Then, the emergence of a more complex civil society, combined with the post-bi-polar transformation of the international system, brought pressure on the state to liberalise state-society relations.

I. A "NEW CLASS"

Asad's first priority, the struggle with Israel, dictated an ever expanding military build-up while sustaining the economic growth crucial to state consolidation at home. This strategy depended on resources extracted from the international and regional systems, namely cheap arms and technology from the USSR/Eastern Bloc and massive financial aid from the Arab oil states. But it also required some economic liberalisation at home to mobilize domestic, expatriate and Arab capital. As such Asad, subordinating socialist ideology to economic pragmatism, pursued a dual strategy of simultaneous public investment and economic liberalisation, aimed at preserving the ability of the regime to control the economy and satisfy its constituency, while still appeasing and encouraging investment by the Syrian bourgeoisie.

State dominance of the economy was nominally sustained since much external aid was funnelled through the state which used part of it to finance a public sector industrialisation drive in the 1970s. In some other mixed sectors, like internal trade and construction, state firms also expanded their domains. At the same time, liberalisation of trade opened Syria to Western imports, fuelling revival of the private sector, and the proliferation of a comprador bourgeoisie. Much of the new private business took the form of speculation on real estate and foreign exchange, cornering import licenses for scarce commodities like autos, or import-export operations which widened consumption rather than production. But migration of workers to the Gulf relieved unemployment and generated remittances while expatriate capital began to flow

into Syria to finance new commercial enterprises. All this amounted to several economic safety valves.

In addition, however, the state turned over implementation of much of its development program to foreign firms and local contractors, fuelling a growing linkage between the state and private capital. The expenditure of state revenues on contracts with private construction firms and other sub-contractors and public sector purchases from private suppliers fuelled private sector growth. Favoured businessmen made fortunes on construction contracts, sometimes as sub-contractors for foreign firms selling turnkey projects to the state. Although much foreign trade continued to be imported through the public sector, agents of foreign firms mediated most transactions, getting commissions and paying kickbacks to officials to win contracts.

At the same time, the political elite was being thoroughly embourgeoisied. The channelling of massive external revenues through the state and to private business created growing opportunities for state elites' self-enrichment through corrupt manipulation of state-market interchanges. Besides outright embezzlement, webs of shared interests in commissions and kickbacks grew up between high officials, politicians, and business interests. Military officers obtained scarce licenses to buy subsidised building materials from the public sector and sold it at black market prices. Smuggling operations, fuelled by the virtual incorporation of eastern Lebanon under the control of the Syrian military, mushroomed and deals sprang up between officers and businessmen needing otherwise unobtainable foreign imports. Since so much business depended on government money, approvals or imports, businessmen needed patrons in the regime, fuelling the rise of rival mutual protection alliances between them and political patrons – typically Alawi officers. Notably, businessmen seeking illegal access to scarce foreign exchange or engaged in foreign exchange speculation had to pay for political protection. Officers seeking to enrich themselves, in turn, needed businessmen with experience and foreign connections (Picard 1988: 139–140).

Thus, as political and military elites used their power to enrich themselves while the private bourgeoisie sought opportunities to translate wealth into political influence, alliances formed and a certain amalgamation between the state and private bourgeoisies began. The recruitment to top office of scions of Damascene bourgeois families gave some with wealth access to power. At the same time, the state bourgeoisie – elements of the political elite and to a lesser degree managers and bureaucrats at all levels – used wealth skimmed off the

public sector to go into business “on the side” – a restaurant, an import business, a chicken farm, a construction firm – thus securing a foothold in the private sector. In addition, a new state-dependent but private bourgeoisie – contractors, agents for foreign firms – some of petit bourgeois origins, was literally being created out of connections to the state. Fragments of the established bourgeoisie also found opportunities to preserve or reproduce itself on similar connections. The various alliances – business, political, sometimes marriage – which developed between state elites and businessmen was generating a new bourgeoisie – in formation, partly official, partly service and commercial, with a foot in both public and private sectors. It may well deserve critics' appellation of “parasitic” (*tufaili*) as it largely milked the public sector in pursuit of partly non-productive activities (Seale 1988: 317–320, 455–60).

The core of this new class was a developing Alawi-Damascene connection, a kind of “military-mercantile complex” as Sadiq al-Azm put it (Seale 1988: 456). Within the political elite, the Alawis, especially military and intelligence officers, and the Damascene politicians and bureaucrats with links to the commercial bourgeoisie were best situated to profit from the new opportunities. The enrichment of the Alawi elite turned one of the previously strongest forces for radical change in the regime into a group with privileges to defend. Through the Damascene connection a regime which began as a rebellion against the establishment was becoming a partner with families of old and new business wealth in the capital. The most striking manifestation of this alliance was Rifat al-Asad's championing of the Sunni bourgeoisie against etatist technocrats.

An interesting question is whether the formation of this “class” was intentional: Seale (1988: 457) speculates that Asad deliberately sought to give his regime a class underpinning needed for stability and, arguably, the muting of the former sharp antagonism between the state and the private bourgeoisie which resulted gave the regime a more secure power base. But new and old elites had yet to be amalgamated into a single dominant class. Alawis had not yet produced a significant stratum of private businessmen and as long as much of the means of production remained state-owned, the state bourgeoisie lacked the secure control deriving from private ownership. Inter-marriage between members of the old oligarchy and the Alawi political elite remained exceptional although the phenomenon was more widespread among the *bourgeois nouveau riche* who grew up in the shadow of the regime.

Nor was the apex of state power “recaptured” by a coherent bourgeoisie intent on capitalist development. Rather, the regime

preserved its autonomy of the various sectors of society, including the bourgeoisie. The top elite – the President and his close associates – ceased to take sides with the “have-nots” in social conflicts, as the radicals had done. But in spite of economic liberalisation, the regime showed few signs of a Sadat-like renunciation of socialism and instead of overtly promoting the consolidation of a new capitalist class or the disciplining of labour in the interest of profits, it sought to stay above and balance the various social forces. Far from according the bourgeoisie privileged input into policy-making, it sharply controlled political access on its own terms for nearly all social forces, balancing populist demands channelled through the corporatist “popular organisations” against liberalising pressures from the private sector.

That the bourgeoisie had not recaptured the state does not mean its interests were neglected in decision-making: the absence of a dynamic public sector dictated concessions to those who controlled a good portion of the country’s wealth and entrepreneurship while the informal personal connections that developed between individual businessmen and patrons in the state elite could often sway particular decisions, if not high policy. In times of vulnerability, such as during the Islamic uprisings, business won concessions from the regime. But, if it pushed too hard, the regime responded with populist rhetoric or anti-corruption campaigns targeting businessmen. Crucially, the oil “rent” at the disposal of the state enhanced its relative autonomy of all sectors of society and, in particular, reduced the need to trade concessions to the bourgeoisie in return for taxes and investment.

Nevertheless, by the late seventies, the state, instead of breaking down class barriers, had begun to reconstruct them. For, even as a new rich emerged, the inflation produced by the influx of oil money, and, when Arab aid dropped off, the state deficit financing which replaced it, eroded the relatively fixed incomes of salaried employees, workers and the small peasantry dependent on sale of the crop to the state at set prices. The embourgeoisment of the elite gave it a stake in the protection and expansion of the new inequalities which differentiated it from its populist constituency (Picard 1979a, 1979b).

This had political consequences. Increasingly, the regime’s party and corporatist structures were used less to mobilise support than to contain the discontent of its mass base. Despite the modest political relaxation after 1970, the heavy hand of the security police remained in evidence, sharply constraining political freedoms and thereby increasingly alienating important segments of the professional middle class. By the

late seventies, the regime was suffering from a grave legitimacy crisis, not only in society as a whole but within its own constituency as well (Drysdale: 1982).

II. FAILED ISLAMIC REVOLUTION

The very strategies by which the regime was consolidated proved to be two-edged swords which also threatened it. Even as the regime was establishing roots in a new dominant class, its link to its mass constituency was eroding, while those marginalized – largely from the Sunni urban classes – by the regime’s mixture of statism, rural and sectarian favouritism, corruption and new inequalities, turned to political Islam as an alternative ideology contesting the very legitimacy of the Ba’thist state. Between 1977 and 1982, Islamic militants mounted a sustained and violent challenge – assassinations, sabotage, strikes, and localised mass rebellion. This was to be the major test of the regime’s strength: in the end this would-be Islamic revolution failed but the regime only survived with great difficulty and through massive repression.

A. *The Islamic movement*

The Islamic movement faithfully reflected the interests and values of the roughly half of society effectively excluded by the Ba’th state. Historically, the leadership of political Islam in Syria was provided by politicised *ulama* and the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwān*). The *ulama* had long been engaged in a rearguard action against the secularisation of political life in Syria and they particularly resented the militantly secular and minority-dominated Ba’th. They mobilised under Shaikh Habannakah to protest alleged Ba’thist atheism in 1967 and again to force the inclusion of Islamic provisions in the 1973 constitution. Many, recruited from urban merchant families or combining their religious functions with petty trade, also pressed religion into the defence of private property: they denounced Ba’th socialism as Marxist and hence atheist (Bata 1982: 14). Islamic disturbances often started with anti-regime sermons in the mosques, then spilled over into protests in nearby streets, and the call to rise against the regime was, more than once, proclaimed from the minaret. Since they were not organised in a state controlled hierarchy comparable to al-Azhar, the *ulama* retained considerable autonomy of the regime, although their political capacity was also limited by the absence of effective organisation comparable, for example, to that of the Iranian mullahs.

Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood leadership was transformed into the vanguard of anti-Ba'thist militancy. The early Syrian Ikhwan under the leadership of Mustafa Saba'i initially shared the combination of nationalism and populism typical of Syria's middle class movements, including the Ba'th: Saba'i was jailed by the French for anti-imperialist agitation, denounced the old feudal oligarchy and called for armed struggle to liberate Palestine (Abd-Allah 1983: 116-118). However, once the Ba'th took power, the Ikhwan became its ideological antithesis, seeking to restore much of the pre-Ba'th order. Isam al-Attar, Saba'i's successor, disputed Ba'thist power, was exiled, abandoned Saba'i's populism, and let the movement stagnate. In the mid-sixties a charismatic militant, Marwan Hadid, arose in Hama on the fringe of the formal Ikhwan, leading several uprisings and launching a campaign of assassinations against the Ba'thist elite. From a cotton-growing family, he expressed the city's rage at Ba'thist rural reforms. But he neglected the organisation needed to really threaten the regime. It was not, therefore, until the late seventies that the Ikhwan had effectively regrouped behind a new collective leadership, largely from middle class, ulama-linked families. Adnan Saad ad-Din, a middle class educator, emerged as leader (supervisor) in 1975 and Sa'id Hawwa, a middle class shari'a graduate became "chief ideologue." Ali Sadr ad-Din al-Bayanuni, an Aleppine lawyer from an ulama' family, became deputy supervisor while Husni Abu, from an Aleppine business family and son-in-law of a prominent *alim*, headed the military branch (Abd Allah 1983: 101-128; Mayer 1983; Dekmejian 1985: 119-123).

If these leaders lacked the standing or unquestioned authority of a Hassan al-Banna or a Khomeini, they were nevertheless organisation men who replaced the movement's informal structure with offices, chains of command, representative bodies and fighting cells. A core of cadres was developed and a wider circle of supporters mobilizable in times of confrontation was fostered; thus in Aleppo, Ikhwan fighters grew from about 500-700 in 1975 to ten times that in 1978 and perhaps nation-wide to 30,000. The scale and durability of the rebellion they mounted in the early eighties indicated a substantial advance in organisational capabilities (Dekmejian 1985: 118-119).

B. An Islamic counter-ideology

By the 1980s, the Ikhwan's ideology, reflecting its utter disaffection from populist Ba'thism, was a relatively liberal but economically anti-populist variant of Islam which expressed the anti-statist world view of

the *suq*, Sunni resentment of minority domination of the state, and the need to appeal to Syria's relatively liberal educated classes.

The first task of Islamic revolution was, the Ikhwan declared, a jihad to rid Syria of the Ba'th's sectarian military dictatorship led by Alawi unbelievers. It would be replaced by an Islamic state in which *shura* would be institutionalised in a strong elected parliament and an independent judiciary of shari'a jurists would have the power to nullify anything contrary to Islamic law. Freedom of expression and party competition were guaranteed, except for parties against Islam or linked to foreign powers (such as communists). Since the majority of Syrians were Muslim, the state had to be Islamic, but the rights of religious minorities would be guarded. Nevertheless, an austere republic of virtue seemed indicated: Islamic law would rule every branch of social life, the vices which the Islamists believed infected society - gambling, extravagance, alcohol, prostitution, night-clubs - would be eradicated and the citizenry morally regenerated by a return to the way of the prophet. Certain more radical Islamic leaders went further, rejecting democracy and holding that men must be ruled by the command of God through a pious caliph (Abd Allah 1983: 201-267).

If the Islamic state would be repressive of individual license, its economic order was based on a return to free enterprise. The Ba'th system was said to mix the worst of the West (rampant materialism) and of the East (an unproductive state sector which destroyed incentives and was corrupted to enrich a small political clique). Islamic manifestos demanded the bloated bureaucracy be cut and the state withdraw from the regulation of and competition with private commerce. Workers had to cease to mangle and to work for their wages. Land reform had only reduced agricultural output. An Islamic economy would legitimate free enterprise and the "natural incentives" of a fair profit, "as prescribed by the Quran" (Sa'id Hawwa interview, Die Welt, Dec 23, 1980). The only populist plank was the traditional provision that class gaps be narrowed through payment of *zakat* by the rich to support charitable endowments for the poor and by a state guarantee of basic needs for all citizens.

C. Social roots of conflict

The mass appeal of political Islam was historically concentrated in the traditional urban quarters where the ulama, the mosque and the *suq* came together. In the elections of the 1940s and 1950s, the Ikhwan elected a handful of deputies from the popular quarters of Damascus and reached a high of ten seats nation-wide in the 1961 elections. Its

expansion was obstructed in the pre-Ba'th era by the clientele networks of the old notable parties, the greater appeal of the secular parties to the mobilising middle class and the powerful appeal of Nasserism to its own urban mass constituency. With the decline of the notable parties under Ba'th rule and of Nasserism after Nasser, however, the Ikhwan had outlasted its major rivals for the support of the urban masses (Batatu 1982: 17-18; Hinnebusch 1982c: 153-54).

Under the Ba'th, the movement's core support in the traditional urban quarters was strengthened, for this part of society, from large notable to small trader, paid the heaviest costs of Ba'thist social reforms, especially the state take-over of foreign trade, restrictions on imports, and a growing state retail network which deprived merchants of business. In the late 1960s, the radical Ba'th government's war on black marketers in the *suq*, in which merchants were arrested and stocks confiscated, inflamed animosities. Rich notable families with clientele ties in the old quarters gravitated to the Islamic coalition, supplied money, and engaged in conspiracies: there is much to the claim that "behind the mask of religion stands the Khumasiya" - Syria's main private industrial combine nationalised by the Ba'th and a symbol of the power of capital. The professional middle class frequently joined this coalition: Islamic protests against socialism were invariably linked with merchant and professional strikes. Thus, Islam, interpreted to exclude socialism, became a natural vehicle of protest for the victims of Ba'thist statism.

After 1970, Asad attempted to conciliate Muslim and bourgeois opinion. He portrayed himself as a pious Muslim, cultivated the ulama, and launched an economic liberalisation which revitalised the private sector. But he could not readily overcome the image of the regime as illegitimate sectarian rule among parts of the Sunni city. Moreover, business had still to deal with inefficient and unsympathetic officials or pay off corrupt ones and remained insecure in the face of new state interventions in commerce.

By the time of the Islamic uprisings in the late seventies, the core of the Islamic movement continued to be drawn from its historic bases: youth from "traditional" artisan and petty merchant families frequently recruited in mosque study circles. However, as many such youth went to university, a growing proportion of Islamic activists came to be drawn from the university educated. And as the Ikhwan came to express opposition to Ba'th social reforms, sons of higher status families, often professionals who would once have joined the old liberal-nationalist

notable parties, now joined the Islamic movement. All this meant a more educated and higher status pool of activists (Batatu 1982: 20).

There was, however, a clear geographic differentiation in the receptivity of urban Syria to Islamic rebellion: while the northern cities, notably Hama and Aleppo, were hotbeds of unrest, Damascus remained quiescent. This was in good part due to state policies. Asad co-opted into the regime middle and even upper class Damascenes. Close to the centre of power, personal connection and corrupt influence, the Damascene bourgeoisie was enriched on the disproportionate share of public money expended in the capital. By contrast to Damascus, traditional Hama suffered under Ba'th rule. A historic centre of Islamic piety, it took particular offence at Ba'thi secularism. It resented the favour shown the surrounding villages it used to dominate. Small inner city textile industries suffered from the competition of large state factories around Hama which recruited from rurals (Lawson 1982: 24-7). The great Hamawi families - the Keilanies, Barazis, Azms - found galling the presence of Ba'th provincial officials in the heart of their once exclusive preserve. Aleppo was a similar case. The main seat of Syria's agrarian bourgeoisie, it especially suffered from agrarian reform. A political centre the equal of Damascus in the pre-Ba'th era, it was hurt by the regime's centralisation of power.

In the late seventies, support for political Islam was broadening beyond its original core to the wider educated urban Sunni middle class. As politics degenerated into a competition for scholarships and jobs through government patronage which seemed to favour Alawis, resentment of this translated into sympathy for political Islam. Most damaging, perhaps, the regime, in alienating parts of its own actual or potential constituency, turned many to Islam as a vehicle of protest. Inflation hurt the state employed middle class while corruption, inequality and the enrichment of the power elite alienated many party members or sympathisers. The 1976 Lebanon intervention against Palestinians and Muslims in defence of Christian "rightists" damaged regime legitimacy among Arab nationalists and wider Sunni opinion. As the regime's nationalist-populist legitimacy declined, while authoritarian rule gave no legitimate outlet to dissent and no other secular ideology offered a credible alternative to the Ba'th, political Islam acquired the sympathy of wider sectors of the population than ever before (Seale 1988: 320-321).

While the growing conflict between Ba'thism and political Islam appeared to pit Alawis against Sunnis, in fact, the Sunni population was

split. The Sunni middle class did not go over to the Islamic opposition *en masse*. Upper-middle class professionals entered tactical alliances with the Ikhwan, but, generally liberal-minded, they were unreceptive to Islamic ideology. The university campuses were not swept by Islam and opposition to the regime there was as likely to take a leftist form. There was some sympathy for the Ikhwan among teachers and government employees, but their dependence on state employment, the strength of the secular centre and left among them, and the anti-statist ideology of the Ikhwan, deterred active pro-Ikhwan opposition. Urban high school students played a role in Ikhwan street protests, but the Ba'th also had an organisation in the schools which mobilised counter-demonstrations.

The Sunni lower strata were also split. Only traditional labour was clearly in the Ikhwan camp, providing many of the foot soldiers of rebellion. While the Ikhwan once had a modest following in the trade unions, in the sixties leftist trade unionists had mobilised against Islamic opposition to socialism and there is no evidence Islamicists had made a comeback there. In other countries, recent migrants to the city, alone in this larger more impersonal environment, have been especially receptive to fundamentalist Islam. Yet many rural migrants in Syria already had relatives established in the city with connections in the Ba'th-run state; and, the Ikhwan, opposed to rural migration as a threat to its own urban constituency, neglected their recruitment (Abd Allah 1983: 91-2). Nor did the Ikhwan much penetrate the countryside, except in a few larger villages near the cities. Rural recruitment was of low priority for it and village Ba'thists were obstacles to it. Similarly, the ulama's numbers and density were unevenly distributed: in 1970, of the 3,000 ulama, two-thirds were concentrated in urban areas while there were only a thousand for 6,000 villages. By contrast, the Ba'th had cells in most villages (Batatu 1982: 14).

In summary, the confrontation of state and Islam was a hybrid of class, group, and urban-rural conflict: a mix of attempted revenge by old class enemies of the plebeian-dominated Ba'thist state, disaffection by newly marginalized groups, and a sectarian war stimulated by unequal access to the public font of rent and patronage. Ultimately, perhaps, the conflict was most powerfully rooted in the split between the city with its commercial spirit and the agrarian socialism of the village.

D. Failed revolution and "Totalitarian" repression

The Islamic uprising began in the late seventies with an intensive campaign of sabotage and assassinations of Alawi elites. As the Islamic

challenge mounted, an internal debate raged in the Ba'th between hard-liners headed by the President's brother, Rifat, and relative liberals such as Prime Minister Mahmoud al-Ayubi who wished to defuse opposition through limited political liberalisation and anti-corruption reforms. Reflective of this struggle, until 1980 the regime mixed appeasement and repression. To shore up eroding support among the urban salaried middle class, it increased bureaucratic and military salaries and tightened anti-inflation price controls. It promised more freedoms to the small leftist and nationalist parties which made up the pro-regime National Progressive Front and opened negotiations with other such groups in opposition – such as the Riyad al-Turk-led communist faction and Jamal al-Atasi's Arab Socialist faction. It launched anti-corruption campaigns and promised restrictions on the use of state security courts. The 7th Regional Congress of the Ba'th Party met in an atmosphere of crisis in which delegates blamed corrupt incumbent leaders – always excepting Asad's inner circle – for damaging the party and replaced them with new men. A new government of middle class technocrats was appointed under a reputedly "clean" Damascene Sunni prime minister, Abd al-Rauf al-Kasm. Some of the regime's moderate critics hoped its vulnerability could be used to reform and liberalise it, but generally the strategy of concessions failed: radical leftist groups and the professional middle class calculated that the weakened regime could be brought down or transformed by rebellion and so formed tactical alliances with the Islamic opposition (Seale 1988: 323-332).

In the spring of 1980 the Islamic opposition, buoyed by the Revolution in Iran and sensing the isolation of the regime, initiated a new phase of resistance. A campaign of attacks on government installations in Aleppo escalated into urban guerrilla warfare, while mass pro-Ikhwan demonstrations flooded the streets and whole quarters slipped out of government control. Similar disturbances spread to Hama, Homs, Idlib, Latakia, Deir ez-Zor, Maaret-en-Namen and Jirsh-Shagour. In Aleppo, professional associations backed their demands for an end to arbitrary security practices and for political freedoms with strikes and were joined by merchants protesting price and supply controls. The ulama called for the release of political prisoners, an end to martial law and application of Islamic law. Former political leaders, who had been marginalized by Asad's consolidation of power, began to organise in the hope of offering an alternative should the regime collapse. Ba'th party founder Salah ad-Din Bitar, publishing a journal in Paris, became a rallying point for disaffected Ba'thists. Anti-regime

leftists demanded political freedoms and an end to repression. The partial adhesion of leftist and liberal middle class elements to an Islamic-led opposition made the prospects of a generalised anti-government movement under an Islamic umbrella, as in Iran, more real than ever before.

The heightening threat to the regime began to shift the intra-regime balance toward the hard-liners who favoured repression over concession. The leaders of the lawyers, engineers, and doctors syndicates were purged and imprisoned. In mid-April 1980, government security forces carried out a massive sweep of northern cities in an effort to smash the Ikhwan network. When the rebellion continued, the hard-liners argued that reactionaries had exploited limited liberalisation and urged a return to "revolutionary vigilance." The regime charged that the opposition was part of a "Camp David conspiracy" by the US, Israel and Egypt to break Syria's steadfastness against Arab capitulation. The party attempted a counter-mobilisation of the labour, peasant, and youth unions and recruited armed militia units to defend the revolution. Asad exhorted peasants not to forget the bad old days when they were treated as the property of the landlords and warned that reaction had deep roots which still threatened the peasants' stake in the revolution. The murder of a landowning family in Harem by armed peasants and an atmosphere of intimidation which kept landowners from their estates in other villages around Aleppo was a warning to the old families that, without the protection of the government they disliked, their property rights were unenforceable. Asad, supposedly bowing to peasant demands, decreed a third minor land reform. A decree raising wages and favouring workers against their employers sent a similar political message.

An assassination attempt on the President in June 1980 gave the hard-liners a free hand to hunt down the regime's adversaries: terrorism was met by state terrorism. Rifat threatened a blood bath in defence of the regime. Islamic prisoners were massacred at Tadmur prison. Membership in the Ikhwan - after a amnesty period - was made a capital offence. The regime sent assassination squads abroad, murdering Salah al-Din Bitar and the wife of former Ikhwan leader Isam al-Attar. Raids by security forces on Ikhwan hideouts in which weapons were seized and military field courts delivered summary executions, sometimes degenerated into indiscriminate killings; in their little care to distinguish the activist Ikhwan from their passive supporters, they demonstrated the murderous lengths to which the regime would go to preserve itself. An

emboldened Rifat sent his militant "Daughters of the Revolution" into the streets of Damascus to tear veils from the faces of traditional women. Interminable violence without prospect of resolution enabled the regime to play on the fears of the middle class of a breakdown in public order (Seale 1988: 326-32).

Both sides apparently wanted the show-down which came in Hama, the Ikhwan stronghold, in February, 1982. In reaction to regime security operations, militants assaulted government centres, executed officials, and declared the city liberated. Members of the old families, such as the Barazis, were joined in opposition to the regime by followers of their old anti-feudalist enemy, Akram al-Hawrani, a symbol of the extent to which the old class struggle was being superseded by a sectarian one. Since government forces could not penetrate the narrow streets, they used helicopter gunships, bulldozers and artillery bombardment against the city, virtually razing whole quarters and killing many thousands. The Ikhwan's call for a nation-wide uprising failed. Hama was more than people bargained for: those who had joined the opposition less out of Islamic zeal than dislike of the regime, melted away. The Islamic movement was decimated. The episode seemed to support Machiavelli's view that repression, provided it was done thoroughly, could work (Mayer 1983: 608; Seale 1988: 332-338).

What explains the ability of the regime to withstand the rebellion? On the one hand, the regime proved much stronger than its opponents anticipated. The security apparatus mounted a repressive campaign of unusual ruthlessness, led by Alawi troops with a stake in regime survival. It was backed by the party and army, the best organised institutions in society; they did not, with few exceptions, split or unravel along sectarian lines, even under the pressures of near sectarian civil war. This solidarity of regime institutions, in turn, is explained by both the Alawi network which controlled them and their roots in the village which used to be exploited by the same urban forces represented in the Muslim uprising. The regime's sect-party combination, penetrated the Sunni-dominated bureaucracy and villages, making them largely unavailable for anti-regime mobilisation. The outcome suggests that the salaried middle class/peasant base the regime had incorporated remained, though eroded, significantly intact. The crisis also revealed both how far shared interests had solidified between the regime and a Damascus-centred segment of the bourgeoisie and the very limited extent of this development elsewhere. At one level, the regime survived because the Alawis were better organised, armed, and centrally

positioned; at another, because the struggle pitted a state, with all its resources and many dependants against those who had been marginalized by this state.

Nevertheless, had the Islamic movement been able to mobilize the Sunni majority, thereby splitting state institutions, it would almost certainly have brought down "minority rule." But it suffered from flaws which prevented it from putting together the ingredients of such a mass revolution, notably an urban-rural coalition. The movement was too urban and regionally based. Its anti-populist version of Islamic ideology lacked sufficiently wide appeal. Its attack on the state threatened the large military and bureaucratic middle class while the secular left, organised workers, and peasants were wary of any return of power to merchants and landlords. The minorities – a fourth of the population – feared an Islamic state. Finally, where political Islam has been most successful, it has fused religious zeal with nationalist revolt against a foreign or foreign-dependent regime but the Ba'th had enough of a nationalist character to deprive Syrian Islam of this weapon.

The failed Islamic revolution arrested the development of the Ba'th state. On the one hand, the limited liberalisation begun in 1970 was cut short while the rebellion strained relations with the bourgeoisie and forced the regime to fall back, temporarily at least, on its traditional mass constituency, checking trends which had seemed on the verge of closing the gap between the political elite and the emerging economically dominant class. On the other hand, the seeds of totalitarianism, always present in the Ba'th's peculiar version of military Leninism, were activated as the state responded to the Islamic uprising by ratcheting up the level of control and repression. A purge of mosques, religious associations and professional syndicates threatened to eliminate these as bases, not just of Islamic opposition, but of civil society. The surviving modicum of press freedom and party pluralism was deadened. Inside the ruling party, the remnants of democracy – debates and elections – ceased and had not been restored even at the end of the nineties. The sack of Hama would stand for some time as a reminder of the costs of opposition.

The regime's brief flirtation with "totalitarianism" could not, however, be sustained, for it lacked the organisational muscle to wholly subordinate civil society: it never "atomised" society, where family, religious and neighbourhood solidarities retained their integrity and where networks of talk and rumour, informal groups, and personal connections penetrated the state, cut across political cleavages, and

often softened the harshness of the regime. While Syria's Ba'thist structures resembled Iraq's, the regime eschewed the systematic terror needed to pulverise society in a way comparable to Iraq. Equally important, lacking a dynamic public sector, the essential economic underpinning of totalitarianism, or sufficient oil revenues to substitute for it, the Ba'th regime had to seek a *modus vivendi* with the bourgeoisie which was incompatible with continued totalitarian repression.

III. ADAPTING TO THE "NEW WORLD ORDER"

A. International Transformation: the Narrowing of Regime Options
The Ba'th state survived the Islamic revolution with its structure and orientation intact. But by the late eighties it faced new challenges, both domestic and international. Most obvious were the dramatic transformations in its international environment which narrowed its options and contracted its resources. The decline of oil prices after 1986 constricted the flow of rent from Syria's Gulf state donors which, together with heavy military burdens, threw Syria's economy into crisis in the late eighties. The weakening and later collapse of the Soviet Union, in depriving Syria of aid on concessionary terms and East bloc markets and technology, seemed to require that it reintegrate into a world capitalist market dominated by ideologically hostile states. Soviet collapse ended Syria's ability to exploit bi-polarity, depriving it of Soviet protection and cheap weapons while ushering in unchecked American hegemony. This seemed make a militant policy toward Israel unacceptably risky and futile while a diplomatic resolution of the conflict had become almost wholly dependent on American diplomacy and willingness to acknowledge Syria's legitimate interests.

These global changes inevitably had grave domestic implications for a regime consolidated through the exploitation of external resources and threats. The Ba'th's legitimating Arab nationalist mission, turning on the conflict with Israel, looked obsolete while the realignment toward the US needed to get its help in a diplomatic settlement might well require some domestic liberalisation. The demonstration effect of communist collapse threatened an authoritarian state built on a socialist ideological party and a public sector. If, as some pundits insisted, the regime was largely a function of Cold War largesse, now withdrawing, its economic and fiscal base could crumble and indeed the economy entered the nineties sunk in stagnation. Short of collapse, the combination of the more complex society modernisation was creating

with less regime resources arguably put the regime under pressure to concede some political liberalisation to substitute for its declining ability to deliver economic benefits and security. Yet, in fact, the regime successfully adapted, at least in the medium term, to its more demanding environment, proving again its tenacity and durability in the face of pressure.

B. The survival of civil society

Three decades of “military Leninism,” and particularly the repression of the Islamic rebellion, undoubtedly curbed the autonomy and viability of civil society. However, not only did it survive, but, by the nineties, the Ba’th actually faced an increasingly complex, potentially more mobilised society. First, its own development drive, in fostering a proliferation of social forces enjoying more diversified resources, was broadening the potential bases of civil society and arguably creating pent up pressures for greater political pluralism. The 1960s and 1970s were a period of substantial economic growth which accelerated social mobilisation, as measured by increased education, literacy, urbanisation and the non-agricultural proportion of the work force. Urbanisation, raising the percent of urban population from 37% in 1960 to 50.5% in 1990, eroded the primordial isolation of village and minority sect, incorporating them into a larger-scale society. Literacy doubled between 1960 and 1989 while the differentiated modern work force proliferated as labour in agricultural plummeted from 51% to 26% in the same thirty years. The proportion of the labour force with secondary or university education climbed from about 5% of the population in 1970 to about 28% in 1989. As professionals and skilled workers proliferated so did membership in “secondary associations,” ostensible networks of civil society. Syria became a middle income country with a significant educated middle class (Hinnebusch 1993b: 252).

Widened economic development and social-mobilisation was not, in itself, enough to force political pluralization of the regime, for the threshold at which mobilised social forces can no longer be contained without pluralization varies greatly. Where, as in Syria, the government employs perhaps 40% of the work force, including a large part of the educated and even professional classes, they lack the independence to challenge the state which more dispersed control of property might provide (Hinnebusch 1993b). The professional syndicates which organised the middle class were not autonomous of government and the largest growth in numbers was in state-dependent professionals such

as agronomists and engineers, while lawyers, often a force for checking state power, lagged.

Yet, as the government’s ability to provide economic resources declined, especially as inflation threatened the purchasing power of those on fixed state salaries, associations sprang up to fill the gap. Officially approved housing and transport co-operatives, in which members pooled resources, grew. So did informal associations wholly outside of government control, such as those in which government-employed professionals, to enhance their fixed incomes, pooled resources to import goods. And, the sheer increase in the numbers of educated professionals meant that, to contain the brain drain, to cope with the growing gap between the number of graduates and available state jobs, and to avoid the political threat of the educated unemployed, the state was under pressure to accommodate the expectations of the educated middle strata for greater economic and personal freedom (Hinnebusch 1993b: 251–52).

Secondly, the limited capacity of the regime to penetrate the more traditional sectors of urban society permitted an “alternative” civil society, relatively outside its control, to persist. Despite the regime’s victory over Islamic militants, Islam as a natural counter-ideology obviously could not be eradicated and remained deeply rooted in the urban *suj* where a merchant ethos mixed with a pervasive religious sensibility nurtured by the ulama. Moreover, the *suj* constituted a semi-autonomous economic base for this civil society. Indeed, the artisan and merchant petite bourgeoisie, far from declining under the Ba’th, had actually increased: according to one calculation (Longuenesse 1979: 4–5), the petite bourgeoisie doubled in size during the socialist decade of the sixties – from 110,900 to 216,090. The number of merchants grew substantially in the more liberal decades from 1971 to 1991. The labour force in trade grew about 7% per year and, despite the austerity of the eighties, had by 1989 increased its proportion of the labour force from 9% to almost 12%. In some respects, the petite bourgeoisie flourished in spite of the regime, but it also sometimes developed in symbiotic relations with public sector suppliers and buyers, thus manipulating the regime to its own benefit (SAR 1976: 151–2; SAR 1991: 76–77).

The capacity of small private enterprises to grow in the space left by gaps in state control is apparent from several case studies. For example, in certain rural areas, such as Yabroud, independent family-owned light industries developed from a pre-existing artisan tradition while a history of emigration fostered the import of technology and the accumulation

of capital, closeness to Lebanon permitted smuggling to overcome raw material constraints, and product lines were chosen from those outside of state price controls (Escher, 1990). Another case is that of small textile manufacturers and artisans in Aleppo. Those who joined the officially-approved Syndicate of Artisans or the Chamber of Industries were entitled to buy inputs from state factories or import agencies, to participate in a social security fund, and obtain export licenses from the Ministry of Economy. Alternatively, such businesses could participate in the "parallel" free market controlled by large merchants; artisans were dependent on these merchants for marketing and might pay higher prices for their inputs but they presumably preferred personal relations with a patron to dependence on state officials. In cases of conflict, they relied on traditional arbiters in preference to the state's Labour Tribunals (Cornand 1984). Despite the pervasiveness of government control, there was, thus, an alternative network wherein participants sacrificed certain benefits for greater freedom. The same was so at the village level as Metral (1984) has shown in the case of the Ghab reclamation project where peasants similarly diversified their dependence between the private and state sectors.

To be sure, such autonomy is not without limits or costs: the habit of hiding assets from potential nationalisation and the fear of competition from state industries deterred the natural expansion of many small industries into larger fully legitimate firms. However, by the late eighties, Syria's economic crisis started to force a retreat in the state's economic role which incrementally created more space for such enterprises. With public sector revenues and economic growth stagnant, the regime sought to enlist private investment to fill the gap and it had to be given, in return, some concessions, notably some curbing of state intervention. At the same time, as revenue constraints forced the regime to cut back patronage, jobs and welfare, many Syrians had to reduce their dependence on government and to diversify their survival strategies by entering petty business. Yet others had acquired economic independence of the state through capital accumulated by work in the Gulf, Africa or elsewhere and invested abroad. The large informal and black market sectors of the economy, where state control was blunted by the corruption of its own officials, even its top elites, demonstrated the limits of the regime's ability to control a private sector it could not dispense with.

By the nineties, the regime had managed to survive the economic crisis through a combination of private sector revival, austerity measures, and

a successful diversification of rent (as, for example, Iranian aid supplemented reduced Gulf aid). Then, in the post-Gulf war nineties, it sought to adapt to the new world order by a major deepening of economic liberalisation. New laws designed to attract foreign and expatriate investment into all sectors of the economy heralded, in effect, the end of the public sector monopoly of major industry. The economic landscape was decisively changing for, by contrast to the expansionist seventies, when the private bourgeoisie flourished on state patronage and contracts, after the eighties the state had far less largesse to dispense and the bourgeoisie's mobilisation of its own capital would give it greater potential autonomy of the state. The combination of a retreating state and advancing society set the stage for political decompression.

C. Political de-compression

How could Asad's regime hope to resist the tide of global democratisation that had swept away its supposedly stronger totalitarian prototypes, especially at a time when it faced a more complex society with fewer resources? Could the Ba'thist elite, products of an earlier illiberal age, adapt to the "new world order?" In fact, unlike the Soviet apparatchiki, the Syrian elite was not prepared to give up power without a fight. Ideological legitimacy was less central to the regime than its communist counterparts and the end of socialist ideology was never going to be fatal. Indeed, the Syrian state had acquired a class underpinning communist regimes lacked and the political elite, with a foot already in business, had no comparable need to transform the system to become a property owning bourgeoisie.

The regime's strategy of political adaptation, which might best be called "calculated political decompression," was a substitute for – not a step toward – more substantial political pluralization and was designed to strengthen, not transform the regime (Hinnebusch 1998b). The regime aimed to adapt its structures and practices to allow a greater opening to and appeasement of the stronger, more independent social forces, the bourgeoisie, the middle class and the Islamicists, without conceding real power (Kienle 1994a). At the same time, Asad actually used the new constraints and the diversification of the regime's base to secure greater autonomy from his own supporters which he needed to make continued policy adjustments amidst a rapidly changing international environment; specifically, more securely incorporating more elements of the bourgeoisie into his regime allowed him to balance it against the army, the Alawis and the Ba'thists, thus preempting any

challenges from his core constituency to the deepening of economic liberalisation or to the peace process.

Asad explicitly described his strategy as pluralization. He argued that his 1970 rise to power had already initiated a Syrian perestroika – political relaxation, opening to the private sector – long before Gorbachev. Although he warned that “the phase through which [Syria] is passing is not suitable for implementing [competitive elections] (FBIS, Daily Report, Near East & South Asia, May 17, 1990, 27), he explicitly approved greater political “pluralism” (*ta’addudiya*) in which presumably the regime would take more account of the views and interests of the bourgeois elements in the more complex social coalition it was putting together. In practice, a substantial political decompression did take place by comparison to the draconian rule of the 1980s. The relaxation of state control was manifest in greater personal freedom to travel, get rich, and consume. The press remained state run but ministers were increasingly criticised in it while press criticism of the “new class” was replaced by accolades to businessmen for their contributions to the economy. The security forces were reined in, religious schools and mosques recovered their autonomy, and political prisoners were released. But checks on state power remained rudimentary: the judiciary, press and professional syndicates enjoyed no independence comparable even to that in Egypt. Party pluralization hardly existed: a few tiny new middle class parties subservient to the regime were tolerated, but there were no liberal parties with the stature of the Egyptian Wafd waiting in the wings in case of further liberalisation. Indicative of the still narrow limits of regime tolerance were the arrests of Syria’s human rights activists when they became outspokenly critical of the lack of democracy. At heart, Asad’s strategy was corporatist, not pluralist and the main element of pluralization was that business interest groups acquired access to decision-makers alongside the “popular organisations” (Hinnebusch 1998b).

Fuller political liberalisation, much less democratisation, was not on the agenda. On the one hand, pressures for political liberalisation were readily contained. Although democratisation experiments in Eastern Europe, Algeria and Jordan initially stimulated some yearning for democracy among the educated classes, the disorder and Islamic fundamentalism it unleashed made its natural constituents – businessmen and intellectuals – wary of it. The bourgeoisie seemed prepared to defer demands for more power in return for business freedom and security while the middle class and intelligentsia were fragmented and

isolated from the masses. In any case, Ba’th corporatism, in incorporating the masses into regime institutions, obstructed the potential formation of a democratic coalition of the bourgeoisie and middle class with popular strata.

On the other hand, the regime was deterred from substantial political liberalisation by the risk it would unleash the pent up resentments of older elements of the bourgeoisie, who had never forgiven the Ba’th for its socialist reforms, or enable political Islam to play the sectarian card. Until the social cleavage between state and bourgeoisie was fully bridged, the Alawis would be threatened by any return of power to the Sunni-dominated business establishment. The regime, determined to prevent the Algerian and East European scenarios, evidently calculated it had enough legitimacy to widen its support coalition through a more liberalised corporatism, but not enough to go further. But these alterations in the regime were enough to incrementally shift the intra-regime balance of power and diversify its social base.

1. **Cutting The Party Down To Size:** The previously high profile of the Ba’th party continued to be downgraded. By the nineties, the Regional Command no longer served as the “politburo” which made policy under Asad’s leadership and became merely one “centre of power.” It could still obstruct change – such as further economic liberalisation proposals – as long as Asad remained uncommitted to it. Official rhetoric denied that the collapse of Soviet socialism was relevant to Syria since Ba’thism had never denied the legitimacy of private property, only extremes of inequality in its distribution; but the party was clearly on the ideological defensive and was ever less a threat to private business. Party elections and congresses remained in abeyance and Asad did not bother to seek even pro-forma approval for major policy turns such as the Gulf war and Madrid peace talks from the party’s highest legitimating body (although the central committee was consulted). However, the party incorporated a partly-Sunni rural base Asad still needed – if only to balance the Alawi jama’a and the Sunni urban bourgeoisie. It still functioned as an etatist interest group and patronage machine accessible to the regime’s initial constituency. And, its plebeian social composition and ideological traditions obstructed its transformation into a party of the bourgeoisie as happened to Egypt’s official party under Sadat (Hinnebusch 1993c: 8–10).

2. **Co-opting The Bourgeoisie:** Even as the Ba’th party was downgraded, the political access of the bourgeoisie was upgraded. The regime’s future depends on its ability to win bourgeois support and

investment without allowing the bourgeoisie to threaten the power elite. On the one hand, Asad's co-optation of fractions of the bourgeoisie allowed him to divide it and to play it off against other classes. On the other hand, the bourgeoisie's business partnerships with regime elements and the rise of a new generation untouched by the class wars of the 1960s created the climate for a closer alliance between the regime and the bourgeoisie, although its terms remained contested. The bourgeoisie wanted stability, personal security, freedom, rule of law and more political access but the regime delivered on only some of these expectations.

First, the prime minister's Committee for the Rationalisation of Imports, Exports and Consumption in which the heads of the Chambers of Commerce and of Industry were included, gave crucial bourgeois access to economic decision-making (Heydemann 1992). This transformed Syria's populist corporatism into the more conventional version in which the state balances between popular and bourgeois interest groups. While business groups had to support the regime's economic strategy and while they have sought compromise rather than confrontation with statist interests in the regime, they now enjoyed some redress against arbitrary interference in the private sector and were allowed to press their interests, notably to defend the new private sector line against statist while pushing for its expansion and legal institutionalisation. Second, a wider array of social forces – members of old families, ambitious nouveau riche businessmen and neighbourhood notables – was co-opted into parliament. They are allowed a bit of patronage and scope to intervene on behalf of constituents with the bureaucracy; a parliamentary block of independent merchants and industrialists sometimes co-ordinated for common interests (Perthes 1992c).

But business did not organise to contest government policy. The bourgeoisie's heterogeneous origins – some fractions fostered by the regime, others once its victims – deterred consciousness of common interests and it was not strong enough to force greater liberalisation than the regime wanted. The favour or disfavour of the regime could make or break a business; for example, currency laws, which most businessmen cannot avoid circumventing and which are generally not enforced, can always be invoked to punish opponents. Some large merchants who tried to win political popularity through press advertisements were, in fact, broken in this way: the regime would tolerate no bourgeois pretensions to political independence.

While it is uncertain how far the bourgeoisie is really satisfied, its formerly intense opposition to the regime was neutralised as increasing parts of it acquired a stake in the status quo. The Damascene bourgeoisie had been co-opted since the seventies, but, significantly, the Aleppo bourgeoisie, which supported the Islamic rebellion out of resentment at its marginalization under Damascus-centred etatism, was successfully appeased by new business opportunities, such as the chance to cash in on export deals to pay off the Soviet debt in the late eighties. Expatriate capital is less easily satisfied and the regime's increasing desire to attract and keep such investment put expatriates in a stronger position: thus, Omran al-Adham, a Paris based expatriate, thinking the time was ripe, published an open letter to Asad urging him to "show confidence in the people" and give them "the opportunity to demonstrate their innovative power in every sphere," while warning that "economic and political freedom go together" (*The Middle East* May-June 1991, 33). This was, of course, ignored and business confidence and investment will remain limited until the regime decisively curbs arbitrary state power and, ultimately, shares real power with the bourgeoisie.

3. **The Opposition: from Repression to Co-optation:** By the nineties, the secular opposition, fragmented into a multitude of factions with out of date ideologies (Communism, Nasserism), alternating between collaboration and opposition, and cut off from the mass public, was little threat to the regime. It was political Islam that represented the main alternative to the Ba'th. But it was also divided and quiescent after the repression of the early eighties. Syria's, large (25–30%) non-Sunni minority population and strong tradition of liberal Islam, were obstacles to the potential of a revived fundamentalist Islam to sweep mass opinion. The government could also play on fear of the Algerian scenario among the Sunni middle class, especially among women and wealthy Westernised strata (Hinnebusch 1993c: 10–11).

Nevertheless, stability and advances in political liberalisation depended on a historic compromise with political Islam and Asad attempted to appease it: by building mosques, patronising the ulama, and propagating Islam in the mass media. He tried to bring the Alawis into the Islamic mainstream. He also tried to foster a conservative (al-Azhar-like) Islamic establishment to channel Islamic currents and legitimate the regime. Headed by the Mufti Ahmad Kaftaru and the Minister of Waqfs, it included the government appointed preachers of the great mosques and several professors of sharia, including a popular

television preacher; at the base of establishment Islam a network of so-called "Asad Koranic schools" was founded.

The regime also sought political détente with opposition Islamicists through a 1992 release of militants from prison, tolerance of Islamicist publications and the co-optation of formerly opposition militants into parliament. Islamic social organisations and movements were now tolerated as long as they refrained from political involvement. Signs of Islamic resurgence included new mosques and a turn among youth to Islam, with the daughters of Westernised mothers assuming Islamic dress. To the very considerable extent that the Islamic opposition had expressed the reaction of the *sug* and sections of the bourgeoisie to Ba'thist socialism, economic liberalisation probably advanced Islamicist détente with the regime (Hinnebusch 1993c: 11–12).

4. **Maintaining A Contracted Populism:** A main challenge facing the regime was to co-opt the bourgeoisie into its coalition without excessively damaging and alienating its original populist constituency. The regime contracted populism but made no systematic assault on populist rights. The austerity measures at the end of the eighties disproportionately hurt workers and government employees who were caught between inflation and salary freezes, forcing many to go into petty business to survive. The regime also cut subsidies although basic commodities continued to be sold below cost in poor neighbourhoods. However, the regime's populist constituency was neither fully demobilised or politically excluded in this process. The access points of popular organisations to decision-makers retained some effectiveness, enabling the trade unions to defend the public sector and labour rights. Worker and peasant union deputies were outspoken against reductions in social spending and lowered taxes on high incomes proposed in the 1992–93 parliamentary budget. There were, however, limits beyond which criticism was not permitted and Asad's instinctive response to rising trade union criticism and suggestions the unions relax their ties to the Ba'th, was a warning that freedom had to be pursued in the "framework of responsibility," not "contradiction and fragmentation" (Lawson 1994b: 152–54). But unions retained some ability to defend their interests against further economic liberalisation precisely because the regime was still autonomous of the bourgeoisie and, its relations with it being less secure, could less easily afford to offend mass opinion than other Middle Eastern states such as Mubarak's Egypt.

Ba'thi populist corporatism obstructed political liberalisation for, to the extent significant elements of the mass public remained incorporated

into the regime's base, they were unavailable to opposition movements, liberal or Islamic, for construction of a "democratic coalition" against the state. Moreover, while mass opposition could potentially be mobilised among those threatened or damaged by economic liberalisation, this required a populist ideology of protest which was lacking: Marxism was discredited while political Islam, which elsewhere in the Middle East performed this function, espoused a free market ideology in Syria.

IV. REGIME VULNERABILITY: SUCCESSION WITHOUT INSTITUTIONALISATION

The same patrimonial techniques which stabilised the Syrian state in the short term were, ironically, obstacles to the political institutionalisation crucial to its longer term durability. At the end of the nineties, Syria's limited political liberalisation appeared to have exhausted itself without beginning to address the problem of democratisation. Ruling elites will share power if they calculate the cost of repression to be too high and if a pact with the opposition on the rules of democratisation will protect their interests. So far, the costs have been contained and the risks have appeared too high for the Syrian regime. Democratisation would require full political freedom for the two powerful social forces, the bourgeoisie and political Islam, which pose the greatest threat to it. The regime lacks the strong institutions through which they might be effectively incorporated: the party, by ideology and social composition, cannot be used to co-opt them while the parliament is too weak to accord them a share of real power. Since, however, the regime cannot do without the private sector and cannot eradicate Islam, it has reached an impasse with society.

The main immediate threat to regime stability is a succession crisis. Rifat al-Asad's bid for power in 1984 seemed to show that, when the inevitable succession crisis comes, praetorianism, suppressed but apparently just below the surface, could break out again. Three decades of personalization at the top – at the expense of the party, the font of Ba'thist ideology and of parliament, embodiment of legitimate procedure – have so weakened the institutions essential to a smooth succession that a post-Ataturk like scenario – the ruling party providing a successor who initiates political liberalisation – seems unlikely.

As such, Asad seemingly seeks a dynastic solution for fear that otherwise a power struggle could shatter the regime along sectarian lines. Thus, by the end of the nineties, Bashar Asad, the president's son,

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was overtly being groomed as if to carry on an Asadian dynasty. Yet Syria is a republic, and Bashar has no party or military seniority or popular stature in his own right which would entitle him to the presidency. As such, his father must attempt to create an alternative power base for him by purging his potential rivals and giving him experience at the top. He has been appointed commander of the Presidential guard, has presided over an anti-corruption campaign and assumed authority over Syria's relations with Lebanon. He was depicted as a new broom, overtly appealing to the youth of Syria's educated middle class. However, while the Alawi barons may rally around him to preempt Rifat al-Asad's enduring ambitions, Bashar may end up a front man for a junta; this could be no more than a temporary solution.

The prospects for a peaceful succession without sectarian strife and Lebanonization have been advanced by the Sunni-Alawi alliances and the *modus vivendi* between state and bourgeoisie which incremental liberalisation has fostered. To the extent the regime elite constitutes, together with the private sector, a new class with a stake in the state, it could perhaps preserve stability in a succession crisis. But the sectarian cleavage and a lack of political confidence on the part of the bourgeoisie means that the regime-bourgeoisie alliance remains unconsolidated.

Nevertheless, a deepening of political liberalisation could actually widen the forces with a stake in the stability of the state and, indeed, succession may, itself, provide the conditions for such a deepening, namely competition between rival elites for the support of civil society. There are already signs of this: thus, the two main apparent rivals for succession, Bashar and Rifat al-Asad have both tried to project a liberal image. The winner may need (like Egypt's Sadat) to strike alliances beyond the regime (Alawi-army-party) core, notably with the business class, and will wish to stimulate the economic growth needed to consolidate his position: this may well require concessions of further autonomy to the bourgeoisie and to civil society. Such a scenario could propel the regime either toward a limited political liberalisation for the bourgeoisie (as in post-Nasserist Egypt) or alternatively toward a broader more inclusive democratisation. But nobody can guess whether Syria's fragile institutional framework could accommodate such expanded participation without a descent into praetorianism.

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This chapter examines the regime's policies, their explanations and their consequences by looking at rural reform, industrialisation, and economic liberalisation.

I. RURAL REFORM AND DEVELOPMENT UNDER THE BA'TH

A. Agrarian policy

The Ba'th's policy of rural development was driven by several conflicting imperatives. The party came to power committed to an agrarian reform which would create a "socialist" agricultural sector based on state-led development, state farms and peasant co-operatives. Its ability to deliver a more equitable and productive agrarian sector was a key to its legitimacy among its putative rural constituency. However, a major practical challenge was posed by land re-distribution to peasants which, in alienating landlords and investors who had hitherto been the source of production requisites and investment, left a gap which the state had to fill if production was to be sustained. When Asad came to power, however, he inherited an agrarian sector in stagnation: unfinished cooperatization meant the state was failing to fill the gap. He therefore sought to placate landlords and investors and revive the private agricultural sector. Not only were landlords encouraged to invest on their reduced post-land reform holdings, but the vast state lands in the scarcely populated Jazirah, on which the state lacked the resources to either resettle peasants or create state farms, were now rented out to agrarian entrepreneurs. Thus, the bourgeoisie, formerly regarded as a bankrupt hostile class, was being made a partner in agrarian development. The state, in the meantime, would concentrate on organising the small peasant sector and reserve its investment for the newly reclaimed and irrigated lands in major hydraulic projects such as the Ghab and the Euphrates Basin. Agriculture would, thus, have dual private and "socialist" sectors (ABSP 1965; 1972b).

However, the exact boundaries between them became a matter of debate among policy makers in the seventies. Party apparatchiki and East bloc educated technocrats wanted to consolidate and expand the socialist (state-co-operative) sector at the expense of the market while Western educated technocrats resisted, advocating selective liberal-