Middle East

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Ambiguities after Asad

The announcement of Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad's death on Saturday, 10 June 2000, prompted panegyrics to his greatness and public displays of grief. Syrians – those who genuinely admired him and even those who feared him – may have experienced sadness at his passing. Death has a way of generating mournful feelings, or at least of inducing apprehension about the future. Yet the political rituals praising his rule, likening his brilliance to the sun's and stressing his role as a 'man of the people', were not new to Syrians. Asad's image was omnipresent for much of his rule (1970-2000), and the rhetoric of flattery was commonplace. In newspapers, on television and during orchestrated events, Asad was repeatedly lauded as the 'father' and the 'gallant knight'. If only by dint of its repetition, all were fluent in this symbolic language of the Syrian state, which had become a hallmark of Asad's rule.

Asking why a regime would spend scarce resources on a cult whose rituals of obeisance are transparently phony, I have argued that Syria's cult of Hafiz al-Asad operated not to produce belief or emotional commitment – which the concepts of legitimacy, charisma, and hegemony presuppose – but to specify both the form and content of 'civic' obedience.[1] Beyond the barrel of the gun and the confines of the torture chamber, Asad's cult served as a disciplinary device, generating a politics of public dissimulation in which citizens acted 'as if' they revered their leader. By inundating daily life with instructive symbolism, the regime exercised a subtle, yet effective, form of power. The cult worked to enforce obedience, induce complicity, isolate Syrians from one another, and set guidelines for public speech and behaviour.

Syrians under Asad both recognized the disciplinary aspects of the cult and found ways to undermine them. The fact that so many politically critical cartoons, films, and television comedies were published or circulated raised the question of why a regime would tolerate symbolic affronts to its official claims of omnipotence. On the one hand, these practices were politically effective to the extent that they counteracted the atomization and isolation public dissimulation fosters. Whereas seeing others obey may make each feel isolated in his/her unbelief, a shared giggle, the popularity of a comedy skit, the circulation of cartoons and transgressive stories enabled people to recognize that the conditions of unbelief were widely shared. Both permitted and prohibited methods of registering resistance were thus partially effective to the extent that they reasserted this widely shared unbelief. At the moment when a joke is told and laughter resounds in the room, people are cancelling the isolation and atomization manufactured by a politics of 'as if'. They are affirming their shared status as unwilling conscripts. On the other hand, it is precisely this shared acknowledgment of involuntary obedience that can make a cult so powerful. Or to put it differently, Asad's cult was powerful, in part, *because* it was unbelievable. The philosopher Slavoj Zizek points out that even if people keep their ironical distance, even if they demonstrate that they do not take what they are doing seriously, they are still complying, and compliance is what ultimately counts politically.[2]

Asad's cult cluttered public space with monotonous slogans and empty gestures, draining citizens' political energies. The insinuation of formulaic rhetoric and self-serving state symbolism in the daily lives of citizens habituated people to perform the gestures and pronounce the slogans constitutive of their obedience. Representations of power and obedience in Syria also operated to produce power and obedience by disseminating credible *threats* of punishment. The images of citizens delivering panegyrics to Asad's rule, collectively holding aloft placards forming his face, signing oaths in blood, or simply displaying his picture in their shop windows, communicated to Syrians throughout the country the impression of Asad's power independent of his readiness to use it. And the greater the absurdity of the required performance, the more clearly it demonstrated that the regime could make most people obey most of the time.

It is after the regime's defeat of the Muslim Brotherhood at Hama in 1982, and Asad's younger brother Rifᶜat's attempt to seize power in 1984, that the sacred imagery and patently spurious content of official rhetoric left the confines of the Baᶜth Party and became part of ordinary Syrians' political lexicon. Although the proliferation of posters beginning with Asad's coup in November 1970 implied a new personification of power, his cult went increasingly into operation as a mechanism of civic discipline when the rhetoric became both flagrantly fictitious and thoroughly familiar to most Syrians. By the mid-1980s and throughout the 1990s, the regime depended heavily on the disciplinary-symbolic mechanisms constitutive of the cult. Overt coercion – incarceration and torture – declined in the 1990s, effectively displaced, although not replaced, by the insidious forms of social control characteristic of Asad's cult.

The de-politicizing effects of Asad's cult on ordinary citizens suggest that to the extent that political contestations are likely at all in post-Asad Syria, in the short-run they will probably occur among Syria's ruling elite. Political challenges to Bashshar's rule could come from within the family, from among members of the ᶜAlawi intelligence networks, and/or from disaffected parts of the upper echelons of the Sunni bourgeoisie. Although there are some who anticipate that Rifᶜat will return to Syria and lead what he termed 'the greatest democratic revolution', it seems unlikely that Rifᶜat would be able to take or hold power even if he were to try. He is reviled by members of the Sunni commercial classes, as well as by many ᶜAlawi military men. One of the family members on whom Bashshar critically relies is his brother-in-law, General Asif Shawkat. In the intelligence services, Bashshar's key ally is General Bahjat Sulayman, who heads the Internal Branch of the State Security Service; he monitors the ministries, the university, the press, the parties, and intellectuals. According to Asad's biographer, Patrick Seale, Bahjat is credited with being the '"main manager" of the transition, the "master of ceremonies"', for the new regime.[3]

Continuing strategies of compliance

In the immediate aftermath of Asad's funeral, the regime initially seemed committed to continuing the symbolic strategies that normalized external compliance under Asad. In a characteristic moment of acting 'as if', one of Rifᶜat's sons appeared on television and publicly distanced himself from his father. Invoking a well-known familial metaphor from the official rhetoric, he stated: 'We have no father other than Hafiz al-Asad.' Crowds shouting 'Bashshar we love you', Syrians carrying black flags through the streets of Damascus, women kissing Bashshar's photographs – these orchestrated acts of 'spontaneity' attested to people's fluency with the language of the cult. Streets were plastered with the familiar pictures of the three Asads – Hafiz, his dead son Basil, who was killed in a car accident in 1994, and Bashshar. Under Hafiz al-Asad's picture the caption typically read, 'The Leader'; under Basil's, 'The Example'; and under Bashshar's, 'The Future'. These pictures of the trinity have, for the last six years, signaled the regime's dynastic ambitions at the same time that they have worked as guidelines for acceptable public speech and conduct. The fact that the transition has thus far been peaceful suggests the effectiveness of the official rhetoric in generating political compliance.

The new regime's first policy initiatives have been mixed. Bashshar's interests in the Internet and his worldliness imply an opening in discursive space and expanded access to information. But the introduction of new technologies does not necessarily undermine a politics of 'as if', for public dissimulation acquires its force by working not on what people think or know, but on how they act. Nevertheless, Bashshar's influence in constructing a new Syrian government headed by Muhammad Mustafa Miro suggests some new political and economic possibilities. There are ambitious plans to use new investment laws to attract funds from the Gulf and from Syrian capital abroad, to liberalize the banking system, to encourage private sector activity, to revamp the higher education system, to curb corruption, and to develop tourism. Yet there are no guarantees that these plans will be realized.

Bashshar also seems less willing than his father to engage in cult practices. He has reportedly ordered the removal of his picture from all non-governmental buildings, and a new and relatively open Minister of Information has been appointed to enliven the state media. These measures indicate the decline in a cult of personality and the emergence of new, perhaps more liberal mechanisms of social control. As technocrats supplant the Old Guard, the political iconography of *paterfamilias* seems to have ceded considerable ground, to be replaced by advertising images and by new techniques of population management. Bashshar's promise to activate the National Front – a coalition of political groups dominated by the Baᶜth party – may signal the regime's readiness to entertain more diverse opinions in Syrian political life, but it may just mean that citizens and politicians will be expected to act 'as if' Syria is a multiparty state. A recent amnesty granted to political prisoners, including members of the Muslim Brotherhood and some communists, continues a trend begun under Asad. In December 1995, as part of an amnesty marking the 25th anniversary of Asad's rule, approximately 1200 political prisoners were released on condition that they sign an oath of loyalty. Bashshar's recent announcement to increase salaries for public sector employees by 25% means that workers will now earn 100 dollars a month – still too little to live on. Indeed, the optimism that seems to attend the announcement of such moves harks back to his father's early days when Asad's Corrective Movement ushered in the man who was himself viewed as more open and pragmatic than his Baᶜthist counterparts.

On the assumption that state socialism will increasingly give way to the effects of global capitalism, new opportunities for rebellion may also emerge. If resistance to economic changes occur, they would most likely be instigated by those who are hurt directly by market reforms. To the extent that the Asad regime, as opposed to the cult, was able to distribute goods and services in return for some measure of genuine loyalty, a widening gap between rich and poor in a market-oriented, post-Asad era may produce political conflicts among groups that had previously been protected by welfare policies, such as students, teachers, and salaried professionals.

The obedience-based strategies that characterized Asad's Syria may well give way to market mechanisms of social control in the long-run, but building market-based compliance takes time. Cultivating desires for commodities, firing employees who fail to perform efficiently, introducing incentives that foster competition among people who otherwise might collectively organize in opposition – these are the sorts of disciplinary effects that liberal markets tend to generate.[4] Were they to be adopted, liberal markets would also undoubtedly produce novel occasions for transgression, inventive ways of staying safe, and new limits to what appears reasonable, questionable, sayable – or maybe even thinkable. ◆▶

Notes

1. See my *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
2. Zizek, Slavoj (1992), *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, p. 33.
3. Seale, Patrick, 'Bashar's new generation can rouse the country from its long slumber', *The Independent*, 12 June 2000, p. 3.
4. See Michael Burawoy (1979), *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; For a contrasting view see Adam Przeworski (1985), *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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