



Democracy Damascus style: Assad the only choice in referendum

President's victory celebrated before a ballot is cast, but dissent is met with imprisonment and intimidation

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High above the teeming streets of Damascus, from giant hoardings, posters and balloons, Bashar al-Assad gazed benignly down on his people - determined, proud, statesmanlike and reassuring - the carefully crafted image of a man fit to carry on leading Syria for another seven years.

Banners praised "our Bashar", defender of sovereignty and stability. "We love you," declared another slogan, printed over a thumbprint in the national colours. Nightly street parties, concerts, dabke dancing and rallies created a festive, jubilee-like atmosphere in the run-up to yesterday's presidential referendum.

No one was surprised that celebrations were taking place before a single ballot was cast; President Assad was, after all, the only candidate nominated by the ruling Ba'ath party. There is no legal opposition. Tellingly, the event is described in Arabic as "renewing the pledge of allegiance" as if this young, British-educated ophthalmologist and computer buff were a mediaeval Caliph.

"We have our own style of democracy and we are proud of it," the information minister, Mohsen Bilal, told the Guardian. "Our hearts are beating for Syria and for Syria's leader," read a text message sent to customers by a leading mobile phone company.

In 2000, when President Assad created a republican dynasty by succeeding his formidable father, Hafez, the referendum produced a comfortable 97.3% vote in favour. The official result this time is unlikely to stray far from that, though accurate turnout figures would provide a better guide to the real mood of this country.

Voting is a "national duty". "You can have problems if you don't," said a driver from Latakia. Public-sector employees and members of the armed forces were out in strength at the celebrations and marches. "Of course I'm voting," grinned a middle-aged man on his way to referendum centre 542 in the old Ottoman Hejaz railway station. "Dr Bashar is our president!"

President Assad does seem genuinely popular, especially with younger people, though there is no opinion polling. Fear of the Mukhabarat secret police is pervasive. Jokes abound about the man who once dared to tick the no box and was dragged back by his terrified mother to beg to be allowed to vote again. "Don't worry," the officials reply. "We've changed it for you - but just this once."

President Assad's triumph is intended to demonstrate to the world that he is a strong and legitimate ruler and things are going his way. Two years ago he was humiliated when Syria was forced out of Lebanon after nearly 30 years, in the wake of the murder of the former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri, an assassination blamed by the UN on Lebanese and Syrian security officials. The creation of an international tribunal to try Hariri's killers is seen as a grave threat.

To the east, Saddam Hussein's execution to the sound of Shia sectarian taunts made grim viewing, and 1.2 million Iraqi refugees have put an enormous strain on the Syrian economy. Washington has kept up pressure to stop the flow of foreign jihadis heading to Iraq via Damascus airport.

But the chaos next door has helped: with stability the new watchword for a US desperate to extricate itself from Iraq, the danger of regime change in Syria has receded. Now foreign VIPs from the EU's Javier Solana to the US Democratic House speaker, Nancy Pelosi, are trooping to Damascus. Earlier this month Condoleezza Rice, the US secretary of state, had a "businesslike" meeting with her Syrian counterpart - the first such encounter since the Hariri murder. Western diplomats suggest the alliance with Iran may be under strain. Even peace with Israel is back on the agenda.

Still, Syria's rhetoric remains defiant. Damascus backs Hizbullah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine. Keeping President Assad in

power, goes the official line, is the best response to Israel and the west. Claims that Syria is behind Fatah al-Islam, the al-Qaida-linked group fighting the Lebanese army, are rejected as hostile propaganda. "Syrians will give their answer to all the American pressure and all the injustices we have been subjected to, and to all the suffering of the Palestinians by saying yes to the president: he has confronted everything that is evil."

None of this is good news for those who hope for change. The brief "Damascus spring" that followed President Assad's succession is a distant memory. Domestic opponents are imprisoned and intimidated: Kamal Labwani, a dissident, was jailed for 12 years last month for meeting US officials.

"We were acting peacefully, moving gradually and we were against violence," said Riyadh Seif, a former MP who was imprisoned for four years in September 2001. Mr Seif rejects the argument that it was 9/11 and the war in Iraq that nipped Syrian reform in the bud. "Bashar was too weak," said a western observer. "The regime lost its nerve."

Economic liberalisation has advanced - though benefiting business rather than the poor. Middle-class Syrians like the new private banks and universities. Foreign diplomats admit that their understanding of the opaque relations between the Assad family, the Ba'ath party and the security services is anecdotal and limited.

Talk of change is met with warnings about Islamist extremism. And it strikes a genuine and highly sensitive chord; thousands died in 1982 after an armed uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood was brutally crushed in Hama. Syrian jihadis have returned from Iraq. It is they, not the small but vocal democratic opposition, who threaten this most secular of Arab regimes. "The jihadis are our enemies," Mr Bilal insisted. "They hate us and we fight them."

"We have Bashar al-Assad, the Muslim Brotherhood and the example of Iraq next door," said another loyalist. "Who would you choose?" But there is third way, retorts Samir al-Taqi, who runs a government-backed thinktank. "Gradual reform that would change the way this country works."

Whether President Assad is willing or able to do that is quite another question - the big one.

"There are a lot of people in Syria who think Bashar is a good man," admits a moderate Islamist who yearns for freedom, loathes the system but eschews violence. "And if there was a free election now he would probably win. But after a while, when they opened the files on everything this regime has done? I don't think so."

Backstory

Syria (population 19.5m) has been ruled by the Arab **Ba'ath Socialist party** since a **coup in 1963** which ended a period of multi-party democracy after **independence from France in 1946**. It was the party which recommended that the **People's Assembly** nominate **Bashar al-Assad**, 41, for a second presidential term, which it did unanimously. April's elections for the 250-seat assembly were condemned by the US as "a meaningless exercise". Emergency laws remain in force. Most sectors of the economy are open to local and foreign investment, but businesses say a large **bureaucracy** discourages investment and **corruption** is rife. Key events in its history include losing the Golan Heights in the **1967 war** with Israel, fighting Israel again in 1973 and sending troops into Lebanon during the **civil war in 1976**. Last summer's three-week war between Israel and Hizbullah was widely seen as a proxy victory for Syria and its ally Iran.

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