

Syria: Strong State Versus Social Cleavages

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INTRODUCTION

The books, *The Struggle for Syria* and *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, written by Patrick Seale, provide reasonable hints for understanding the process of political development of Syria after independence (Seale 1958, 1988). These illuminate the historical background of Syria. Frequent coups and unstable domestic politics coupled with interferences by neighbouring countries became a normal and acceptable practice. Despite all of that, Syria developed into a stable and strong state under the administration of the ex-president, Hafez al-Asad, from 1970 onwards.

While Syria under the rule of Hafez al-Asad increased its involvement in the politics of the Arab Near East, including Lebanon and Palestine, as well as conducting sound domestic politics, it struggled with its geopolitical rival Israel for hegemony over the region. After the death of Hafez al-Asad in 2000, his administration was handed over to Bashar al-Asad, his second son. The rule of the latter, cynically branded as “*jumlūkīya*” (coined word made from “*jumbūrīya*” and “*malakīya*”, “republicanism” and “monarchy” respectively in English) or “hereditary republicanism” (*jumbūrīya wīrāthīya*), sporadically enhanced the pro-reformist movement represented by the “Damascus Spring” from 2000 to 2001.

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Bashar's rule also confronted regional and international pressure. In 2005, after Rafiq al-Ḥarīrī, the former prime minister of Lebanon, was assassinated, the Bashar al-Asad administration was suspected of involvement in the killing and faced hostility from Western countries. Despite its withdrawal from Lebanon, Syria remained more or less a stable political entity. It was the advent of the "Arab Spring" in 2011 that triggered the turmoil in Syria. It is then that the definition of the stability and even the very basis for the existence of a Syrian state came into question.

It is not easy to find the remnants of a strong state in Syria post-2011. The country has become a major battlefield in which domestic and foreign parties fight, as though reverting to Seale's *The Struggle for Syria*. At present, the Bashar al-Asad administration does not control the entire country; some territories are held with the so-called opposition (including Hai'at Tahrir al-Sham, formerly known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham/the al-Nusra Front), Kurdish nationalists (Democratic Union Party (PYD) and Islamic State (IS)). All these factions struggle with each other, along with Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the US-led coalition against Islamic State, in addition to Israel occupying the Golan Heights and supporting opposition/terrorist groups in and around that area.

The Syrian conflict which produced the worst humanitarian crisis in the twenty-first century seems to end in terms of its fighting phase with the government reclaiming the lost territories starting in 2017. Recently, reconstruction and reconciliation have been the main agendas in Syria. The horizon, however, remains full of dark clouds given that Syria has been reduced into a "weak state". In spite of this, Syria has a history in transforming itself from a "weak state" into a "strong state". Examining the political history of Syria's transformation may provide hints for Syria's future.

This chapter analyses the process through which post-independent Syria enjoyed political stability as a "strong state" with a focus on the notion of social cleavages. The first section provides a reading of the historical formation of social cleavages in Syria since the French Mandate (1920–1946). I argue that social cleavages were established and firmly solidified by the French authorities. The second section reveals how social cleavages and politics were interrelated under the post-independence Syrian polity. The final section highlights the challenges that Syria faces given the current conflict. The chapter concludes that Syria can learn from its past in terms of bridging its social cleavages through integrative and participatory politics.

THE GENERATION OF SOCIAL CLEAVAGES

Social cleavages are axes of polarisation in domestic political confrontation. According to Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan who coined the concept, Western European countries faced social cleavages in terms of centre-periphery, state-church, urban-rural, and owner-worker amid the formation of nation-states and the Industrial Revolution, which were reflected in the political party systems in those countries (Lipset and Rokkan 1967).

There are two ambiguous views on how social cleavages affect politics in countries outside Western Europe, that is, countries that do not satisfy the requirements of institutional democracy. The first view is that the demise of a political party system due to the establishment of an authoritarian regime destroys the connection between social cleavages and politics (Hazama 2006: 7–10; Geddes 2003). This viewpoint is dominant in studies on Eastern European countries where authoritarian regimes were established through the formation of communist regimes that followed or overthrew parliamentary democracies. The second view is that an authoritarian state uses or manipulates social cleavages in order to maintain and strengthen its governance. This view is common in studies of African countries with an emphasis on politicising social cleavages on the basis of differences in religion, ethnicities, languages, and so on (Hazama 2006: 10–11; Laitin 1986).

In the case of Syria, its society exhibits cultural, regional, and religious diversity sufficient to create social cleavages, and its populace is conscious of the diversity. Syria's society can be characterised as "mosaic" or "*nasīj*" ("textile" in English) where various religious, sectarian, and ethnic groups coexist. Looking at the religious or sectarian groups, Syria has Sunni, Shia, Alawi, Ismaili, and Druze Muslims, Christians, and even a small Jewish community. As for national and ethnic groups, Syria has an Arab majority, Kurds, and Armenians (Armenian Orthodox Christians and Armenian Catholics). Emphasising the distribution of religious, sectarian, and ethnic groups in the Middle East needs careful deliberation, since it may easily promote the disintegration of countries in the region under the pretext of "democratisation" or "minority protection". Having said that, Figs. 4.1 and 4.2 show the (estimated) population ratios and the main resident areas based on religious/sectarian groups on the one hand and ethnic groups on the other, revealing the "*nasīj*" characteristic of Syrian society.

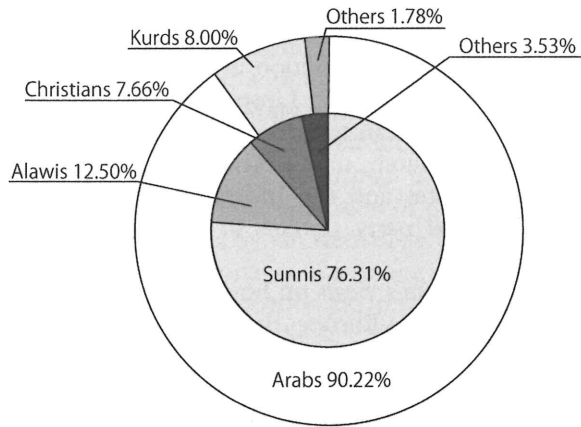


Fig. 4.1 Population ratios based on religious/sect groups and national/ethnic groups (estimated). Source: Author's computations based on Collelo (1988: 63) and Middle East Watch (1991: 90)

I argue that Syria's social cleavages are prominent at five main levels. As shown in Table 4.1, the first is based on differences between sects (Sunnis versus Alawis, Sunnis versus Druzes, etc.), while the second between ethnicities (Arabs versus Kurds, Arabs versus Armenians, etc.). The third social cleavage is marked by regional diversity or by differences in culture, custom, and economic life among "bilād" (the plural form of "balad" referring to "country" in English), that is among the large cities (Damascus versus Aleppo, Homs versus Hama, etc.). The fourth is the contrast between urban and rural areas, largely underpinned by differences in respective economic functions. The fifth is that of social class difference, that is, landowners and farmers in the traditional or feudalistic (*iqṭāʿī*) mode of production and capitalists and labourers under capitalism.

A historical reading of the origins of the social cleavages in Syria takes us back to the French Mandate (1920–1946). Syria's social cleavages were firstly generated under the French mandatory governance that dominated Syria's political and social framework. As is the case with France's establishment of a sectarian system (*al-nizām al-ṭāʿifī*) in Lebanon, France focused on Syria's social diversity in an attempt to split Syria and maintain its rule (Aoyama 2006: 162). The French governance aimed at suppressing the independence movement led by Arab nationalists. France's objective

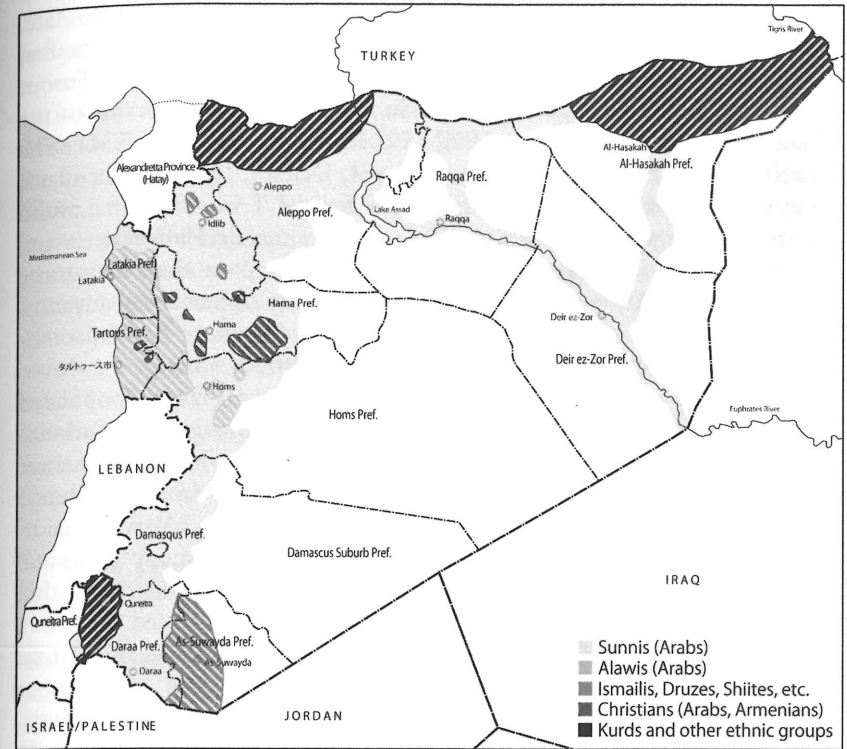


Fig. 4.2 Distribution of resident areas based on religious/sect groups and national/ethnic groups. Source: Author's computations based on Boustani and Fargues (1991: 29), Collelo (1988: 62–67), and Commins (1996: 47–48, 70)

Table 4.1 Major social cleavages in Syria

Factors of social cleavages	
Religions/sects	Sunnis vs. Alawis; Sunnis vs. Druzes; etc.
Nationalities/ethnicities	Arabs vs. Kurds; Arabs vs. Armenians; etc.
Regions	Damascus vs. Aleppo; Homs vs. Hama; etc.
Economic functions	Cities vs. rural areas
Classes	Landowners vs. farmers; capitalist vs. working class

Source: Author's analysis

was to quash the rise of any political power that threatened its mandate. France's governance was mainly enforced through two measures. The first was to give preferential treatment to minority groups in the Special Troops of the Levant (les Troupes Spéciales du Levant), the predecessor of the Syrian Arab Army (van Dam 1979: 39; Khoury 1987: 533–534). The French authorities actively recruited Alawis, Druzes, Ismailis, Christians, Caucasians, Kurds, and Armenians to the Special Troops of the Levant. This is because whereas Sunni Arabs, especially the rich landowners and merchants living in urban areas, were unwilling to allow their sons to be military personnel, the minority groups intended to obtain social advancement through the military which operated a performance-based promotion system (van Dam 1979: 39–40; McDowall 2000: 468).

The second measure was to give autonomy to areas largely populated with minorities. During the French mandate, the reorganisation of administrative districts was conducted frequently. In 1920 when the mandate administration started, Syria was divided into zones: Damascus, Aleppo (both of which had a Sunni Arab majority), and Latakia (Alawite majority). In addition, Alexandretta Province (*līmā*'), in which many Turks and Armenians resided, was designated as an autonomous district within Aleppo. In 1922, while Damascus, Aleppo, and Latakia formed the Syrian Federation, the whole area of Jabal al-Druze, which had a majority Druze, was detached from Damascus and given status as its own autonomous district. Furthermore, in 1924, Damascus and Aleppo constituted Syria, with the exclusion of Alexandretta, Latakia, and Jabal al-Druze. Later, in 1936, Latakia and Jabal al-Druze were incorporated into Syria, joining Damascus and Aleppo, but detached again from 1939 to 1942. In the meantime, Alexandretta became independent as the Hatay Republic in 1938 and was subsequently absorbed by Turkey in the following year (Khoury 1987: 58–59, 533–534; van Dam 1979: 39). The Syrian people were thus forced to be members of ephemeral states due to France's reorganisation. They were therefore prevented from having a firm national awareness, a factor which limited national mobilisation.

These French governance policies expressed in legal and political forms the already existing social and cultural diversity in Syria. Syria was made up of a mosaic of different people (with diversity, as mentioned, based on religion, sect, nationality, ethnicity, region, economic function, social class, and subjective allegiance). Thus, social cleavages were established and firmly solidified by the French authorities.

During the French Mandate, Arab nationalism, Syrian nationalism (*al-qawmīya al-sūrīya*), Marxism, and Islamism, represented forms of resistance to the Western powers' arbitrary border demarcation and its associated social cleavages generation (Aoyama 2006: 164). However, these ideologies were not universal enough in their reach to overcome all the divides created by social cleavages. As mentioned earlier, the concept of the nation for the Syrians did not correspond to that of the state given in the territory known as Syria. However, these ideologies did serve as principle for fostering national integration. Above all, Arab nationalism, Syrian nationalism (*al-qawmīya al-sūrīya*), and Marxism assumed a substantial role in supporting national integration in Syria. As a measure for resisting external intervention and social segregation, criticised as "sectarianism (*ṭā'ifīya*)", the Syrian people sought to overcome their colonially constructed religious and other differences by defining their identity on the basis of historical unity, a language-based community, and a territorial community.

THE HISTORY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICS AND SOCIAL CLEAVAGES

After attaining independence, in April 1946, Syria experienced three political regimes: parliamentary democracy, one-party rule authoritarianism, and authoritarianism based on a "two-tier power structure". Under each regime, social cleavages and politics have connected to each other in a unique form.

Parliamentary Democracy (April 1946–March 1963)

In the 17 years from its independence to March 1963, Syria had a politically unstable system due to successive coups (March, August, and December 1949, November 1951, and February 1954), military regimes (March to August 1949 and November 1951 to February 1954), and the union with Egypt (United Arab Republic, February 1958 to September 1961). Throughout this period, however, Syria had a parliamentary democracy, where social cleavages were reflected in tension among political parties.

In post-independence Syria, parliamentary elections were carried out respectively in 1947, 1949, 1953, 1954, and 1961. In the election of 1947, out of 114 seats, the National Party acquired 24 seats, the People's

Party obtained 20 seats, and the remaining 70 seats were occupied by independents. In the 1949 election, out of 114 seats again, the People's Party gained 63 seats, the National Party 13 seats, Islamic Socialist Front (an electoral alliance led by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood) 4 seats, the Ba'ath Party 1 seat, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party 1 seat, and 31 seats went to independents. In the election of 1954, out of 142 seats, 30 seats were secured by the People's Party, 22 seats by the Ba'ath Party, 19 seats by the National Party, 4 seats by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, 2 seats by the Socialist Cooperation Party, 2 seats by the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, 2 seats by Arab Liberation Movement, 1 seat by the Syrian Communist Party, and 60 seats went to independents. In the 1961 election, for a total 172 seats, the People's Party won 33 seats, the National Party 21 seats, the Ba'ath Party 20 seats, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood 10 seats, the Arab Liberation Movement 4 seats, and 84 seats went to independents. It should be noted that the 1953 election was implemented under the military regime, which therefore cannot be regarded as a free election. In that election, the Arab Liberation Movement overwhelmed other parties by winning 72 seats out of 82 seats (Deiter et al. 2001: 221).

In the period under the parliamentary democracy, the political community of Syria, including the political parties that obtained seat(s) at elections, was roughly classified into two political factions that confronted one another. The first one was conservatives that hoped for the maintenance of existing social and economic systems and their own political advantage. This faction was led by the leaders of the National Party and the People's Party that took the reins of government. The second political faction consisted of reformists who pursued social and economic reforms (especially agricultural reform). This faction comprised, among others, the Ba'ath Party and the Syrian Communist Party (see Fig. 4.3).

The confrontation between these two factions evolved in a manner that encompassed not only difference in political orientation, that is to say conservatives versus reformists, but also due to social cleavages in terms of religion, sect, region, economic function, and class. That is to say, while the conservative faction was considered to represent the interests of the traditional governing classes (big landowners and merchants) comprised of urban Sunnis and capitalists, the reformist faction was considered to speak for the subordinate classes (farmers and labourers) from rural areas, a high percentage of whom were from minority religious/sectarian groups (see Fig. 4.3).

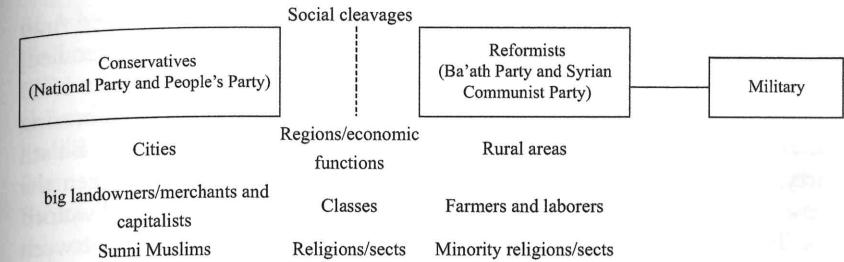


Fig. 4.3 Relation between politics and social cleavages under parliamentary democracy. Source: Author's analysis

Difference also existed within the political factions. Both the conservative faction and the reformist faction were not monolithic. For the conservatives, the National Party's base was located in Damascus, and the People's Party was based in Aleppo and Hama: the two conflicted with each other over regional interests. As for the reformist faction, the Ba'ath Party tried to prioritise the unification of the Arab nations, and the Syrian Communist Party prioritised Marxian internationalism and the uncompromising principle of class conflict. These two positions collided. Meanwhile, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood also began to emerge as a political organisation; it can be regarded to be positioned in between the conservatives and reformist camps. Although the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the conservatives came from the same traditional class, the political orientation of the former at this period was closer to the reformist faction (Aoyama 1995: 51–55).

Furthermore, in analysing this period, it is impossible to ignore the role of the military as a political actor. The military had reformist tendencies in terms of its political orientation and social origin (see Fig. 4.3). They conducted repeated coups from the end of the 1940s to the early 1950s to break the political advantage of the conservative faction and to achieve social and economic reform. For instance, the coups carried out by Adīb al-Shīshaklī in 1949 and 1951 exhibited a reformist characteristic (Seale 1958: 120).

From the middle of the 1950s onwards, the Ba'ath Party increased its integration with the military, which led the so-called Ba'athist Revolution on 8 March 1963. After winning its first seat at the national election of 1949, the Ba'ath Party became the second largest party and played a leading role in the establishment of United Arab Republic in 1958. In the

election of 1961, held immediately after the break-up of the United Arab Republic, the Ba'ath Party was the third largest party. It should be recalled, however, that what ultimately brought the Ba'ath Party to power in 1963 was not an election, but a coup carried out by young officers embracing the Arab Ba'ath ideology. That integration of the military in the Ba'ath Party, culminating in the 1963 coup, resolved the conflict between the conservative and reformist factions: the reformist faction emerged victorious. The involvement of the military also severed the relationship between the social cleavages and the party system by destroying the representative parliamentary democracy (Aoyama 1995: 51–55; Be'eri 1970: 336–337; Seale 1958: 28–31, 37, 39–41, 77–79, 158–159, 176–178; Torrey 1975: 157; van Dam 1979: 40–41).

One-Party Authoritarian Rule (March 1963–November 1970)

In the five decades following the “Ba'ath Revolution”, Syria had an authoritarian regime. The period 1963 to 1970 is characterised by the Ba'ath Party running the country under their substantive one-party system. The social cleavages observed in this period became obvious amid a power struggle within the party.

The power struggle under the ruling of Ba'ath Party became evident at first between the two factions: *Qawmīyūn* (“nationalists” in English) on the one hand and *Qutriyūn* (“regionalists” in English) and Military Committee on the other. *Qawmīyūn* was a faction dominated by senior leaders from the establishment of the party, such as Mīshīl 'Aflaq and Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Bīṭār. This faction's prestige had decreased due to its strategic errors including a short-sighted policy for unification with Egypt and the subsequent disintegration of the party immediately after the union (President Nasser insisted on the dissolution of all political parties in Syria as a precondition to the United Arab Republic). However, *Qawmīyūn* represented the front of the party and pursued the social and economic reforms while maintaining its traditional policy of prioritising Arab unity.

Qutriyūn was a faction of young second-ranked party members from rural areas in Syria, which independently continued to engage in party activities even after the National Command (*al-qiyāda al-qawmīya*) led by Mīshīl 'Aflaq (its Secretary-General) had determined to dissolve the Ba'ath Party upon union with Egypt. Its representative members included Yūsuf Zu'ayyin, Nūr al-Dīn al-Atāsī, Munīr 'Abd Allāh, Sulaymān al-Khashsh, Ibrāhīm Mākhūs, and Sa'd 'Abd Allāh. They sought radical reforms, setting

Marxist-branded socialism as the faction's top priority. The Military Committee was formed in Cairo in the summer of 1959 by 13 young officers including Amīn al-Ḥāfiḥ, Muḥammad 'Umrān, Ṣalāḥ Jaḍīd, Hafez al-Asad, and 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jundī, with further officers joining later. Similar to the members of the *Qutriyūn*, the young officers originated from rural areas, continued to conduct activities even during the time Ba'ath Party was dissolved, and had critical opinions regarding the leadership of Mīshīl 'Aflaq and Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Bīṭār due to their ideology that paralysed the Ba'ath Party's activities at the beginning of the 1960s (Institute of Developing Economies 1983: 85–88).

The power struggle between *Qawmīyūn* on the one hand and *Qutriyūn* and the Military Committee on the other ended in a victory for the latter faction, but also highlighted the superiority within that group of the Military Committee, the chief force behind the “Ba'ath Revolution” and the real power broker behind the regime. The ideological struggle then was about the value to be prioritised out of the Ba'ath Party's three principles, “Unity, Freedom, Socialism”, or whether priority should be given to Arab unity or socialism. Meanwhile, it is also worth reflecting upon the social cleavages that cut through both factions; these were demarked along economic function, with *Qawmīyūn* representing large cities and urban areas, while *Qutriyūn* and Military Committee leaning towards rural areas and local cities (see Fig. 4.4).

As mentioned earlier, the power struggle was finally settled with the *Qawmīyūn* on the losing side. During the ensuing fallout, the leading role of the military became more prominent, while the socialisation of the economy followed an Arabised model of Marxism-Leninism—the revision

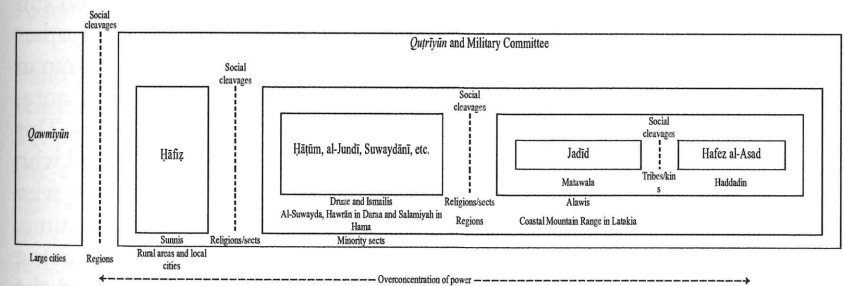


Fig. 4.4 Relationship between power struggles and social cleavages under the one-party rule authoritarianism. Source: Author's analysis

of Arab socialist ideology was referred to as “Arabization of Marxism (*ta’rīb al-mārkiṣīya*)” (al-Ḥāfiẓ 1997). At the party congress held in April 1965 (The Eighth National Congress), Miṣhīl ‘Aflaq stepped down from the post of Secretary-General of the National Command, which was a defining and tangible symbol of his and his faction’s waning influence and authority.

However, a confrontation followed among the members of Military Committee, which reflected a social cleavage rooted in religious sect. The power struggle was between Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ (a Sunni from Aleppo), Secretary-General of the Syrian Regional Command (*al-qiyāda al-qūṭriyya al-sūriyya*) of the Ba’ath Party, and Ṣalāḥ Jadīd (an Alawi from Duwayr Ba’bda Village, Latakia), Vice Secretary-General of Syrian Regional Command. Furthermore, after Ṣalāḥ Jadīd completely excluded Secretary-General Amīn al-Ḥāfiẓ and other Sunni influential figures (and *Qawmīyūn*) such as Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Biṭār (a Sunni from Damascus, then-Prime Minister and Foreign Minister) and Munīf al-Razzāz (a Sunni from Damascus, then-Secretary-General of the National Command of the Ba’ath Party) in the coup of February 1966, a confrontation between the minority sects came to the surface. This struggle resulted in Druzes from Al-Suwayda (including Salīm Ḥāṭūm, a member of the Syrian Regional Command) and Ismailis from Salamiyah (Hama) (including ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jundī, Director General of the National Security Bureau of the Regional Command), and those from Hauran District (Dara’a), including Aḥmad Suwaydānī, Chief of General Staff, were considered to be purged one after another between the middle of 1967 and the beginning of 1969 (see Fig. 4.4).

These successive purges increased the presence of Alawis at the top of the Ba’ath Party. In the late 1960s, Vice Secretary-General Ṣalāḥ Jadīd and then-Minister of Defence Hafez al-Asad became opposed to each other over the relationships with the Ba’ath administration established in Iraq in July 1968 and other military matters, including personnel. The confrontation ended in November 1970 when Hafez al-Asad defeated his rival. This power struggle evolved as a policy confrontation between Ṣalāḥ Jadīd who tried to force through rigid socialisation policies and Hafez al-Asad who aimed at easing of political and economic regulations. At the same time, this power struggle was explained as reflecting social cleavages among Alawi tribes, that is, the confrontation between the Haddadin and the Matawira, the former was regarded as Hafez al-Asad’s faction and the latter

as Ṣalāḥ Jadīd’s faction (Institute of Developing Economies 1983: 91–94, 114–123, 136–146; van Dam 1979: 52–56, 83–94).

During this period, influential leaders made use of “old cleavages” (Barakat 1993: 48) to mobilise their religious/sectarian groups and tribal/kinsman to eliminate political enemies and strengthen their own power (see Fig. 4.4).

Authoritarianism Based on “Two-Tier Power Structure” (November 1970 Onwards)

From November 1970 onwards, Syria had a political regime essentially based on “populist authoritarianism” (Hinnebusch 2001; Heydemann 1999) or “neopatrimonial authoritarianism” (Aoyama and Suechika 2009: 10) under the direction of ex-President Hafez al-Asad. President al-Asad consistently showed his excellent political ability in both domestic and foreign politics, which transformed Syria from a “weak state” that had suffered from political instability into a “strong state” in the Middle East. What Hafez al-Asad established for smooth governance in Syria as a “strong state” was a political structure that I term as “two-tier power structure”. The two-tier power structure is organised in a way to enable the “two powers”, in the words of Maḥmūd Ṣādiq, to be exercised: “visible power” (*al-sulṭa al-zāhirīyya*) and “hidden power” (*al-sulṭa al-khaṭīyya*) (Ṣādiq 1993: 71–72).

“Visible power” is formal power to be exercised legally in Syria’s political system. This “visible power” maintains the appearance that Syria is a law-governed state, with separation of powers, and with the machinery of state supervised by formal power apparatuses, including the People’s Assembly, the Cabinet, and the President.

The People’s Assembly as the legislature has 250 seats for assembly members, each with four-year terms, and who are elected under the large-constituency full multiple-entry system. Since the establishment of People’s Assembly in 1971, the Ba’ath Party has occupied a majority of the seats, and the National Progressive Front, a political party alliance operating under the instruction of Ba’ath Party, has supported it as a coalition partner, together occupying more than two thirds of the seats. The remaining seats have been occupied by independents. Furthermore, almost all ministers in the cabinet have been the members of the Ba’ath Party; however, the cabinet has also had a certain number of independents

and members of parties belonging to the National Progressive Front. The President as the head of state with a seven-year term is supposed to be first nominated as the candidate for the Presidency at the People's Assembly based on a proposal made by the Syrian Regional Command of the Ba'ath Party and then confirmed by a national referendum (Article 84 of Constitution of 1973). The office of President that Hafez al-Asad assumed was authorised under the Constitution of 1973 to exercise influence over all three pillars of the government, including legislative power when the People's Assembly is out of session, appointing and dismissing ministers including the prime minister, appointing and dismissing judges, and concurrently serving as the supreme military commander.

Although "nominal" power apparatuses are legally responsible for the preparation and implementation of policies as is the case with the legislature and executive of other countries, it was certainly not "nominal" power apparatuses that took decisions on crucial matters in the government and the state in Syria.

Meanwhile, "hidden power" is the informal power and the "sole and true power", which "quietly penetrates into every corner of all social and, political situations behind the back of public lives and public activities" (Şādiq 1993: 72). This power was exercised by "real" power apparatuses such as the *Mukhābarāt*, the military, and the Ba'ath Party.

Mukhābarāt is a general term for intelligence agencies, security agencies, and armed security forces involved in the monitoring and suppression of both internal and external governmental opponents. With Syria's *Mukhābarāt* holding 65,000 of full-time officers, and several hundred thousand part-timers, occasional collaborators, and informers, about 1 out of every 300 people in Syria—its total population as of 2011 was about 20 million—would be full-time officials of the *Mukhābarāt* (Perthes 1995: 193). This organisation consisted of many agencies, including Military Intelligence, General Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, Political Security, the National Security Bureau, and the Republican Guard. While variously overseen by the military, the Interior Ministry, the Ba'ath Party, and other organisations and not institutionally connected with each other, these agencies operated by ensuring a certain order that serves the goals of safeguarding the government as well as the provision of favours to its supporters. President Hafez al-Asad existed as the keystone of this order and senior members of *Mukhābarāt* are tied to him based on not only kinship and fellowship but also on trust and, further, the mixed consciousness of awe and fear of the President.

It should be noted that the power of the President was enhanced by the *Mukhābarāt*, with its monitoring of society as well as mutual monitoring so that no agency or senior official would be a threat to the regime. Such a system for preventing the emergence of a faction in the regime capable of single-handedly posing a threat to the President was often sarcastically referred to as "the School of al-Asad" (*madrasa al-asad*) in Syria (*al-Wasaf* 1999: 10).

The military was actually the only political entity in modern Syrian history capable of overthrowing the government. After the establishment of Hafez al-Asad administration, the military was "personalised" by the exclusion of potential political rivals against the regime and the concomitant promotion of loyal officers. Its manpower was estimated to be about 300,000 active soldiers (excluding about 100,000 militias) and about 350,000 reserve soldiers (Cordesman 2005; GFP 2009; IISS 2010).

The intervention in politics by the *Mukhābarāt* and the military was exceptionally authorised by the President under the state of emergency (for more details of laws and regulations related to the state of emergency in Syria, see Mumtāz 2006). However, the Ba'ath Party, which is different from *Mukhābarāt* and the military in that it is part of both the "nominal" power apparatus and the "real" power apparatus, was authorised to achieve its political purposes through extra-legal measures. For instance, Article 8 of Constitution of 1973 stipulated that "the Ba'ath Party is the party to lead the societies and the state". Individual members of the military and *Mukhābarāt* have therefore tried to justify their political interventions by becoming Ba'ath members (Aoyama 2001: 5–23).

In Syria, as a result of building such power architecture, the multiparty system, which included the Ba'ath Party and the satellite parties of the National Progressive Front, was a front that did not conceal the real power brokers operating behind the scenes. In circumstances where the old legal provisions allowed real opposition to register (e.g., Political Party Law), these were regarded as "unauthorised" bodies and had restrictions imposed on their activities. As such, the multiparty system re-generated under the Hafez al-Asad administration was not in any way a real "democracy".

This did not necessarily mean that relations between social cleavages and politics were disconnected. Social cleavages played two important roles in this "two-tier power structure". The first role is in giving a government based on authoritarianism a democratic and pluralistic appearance. For example, this was carried out in such a manner that the posts of Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, and Defence Minister were assigned to

Sunnis, the posts of the Interior Minister and the Information Minister assigned to Alawis, with Ismailis from Salamiyah and Christians also joining the Cabinet (Şadiq 1993: 97–98). Sometimes, such arrangements were criticised as “sectarian” (see Aoyama 2006: 169). At the same time, however, they brought recognition that comprehensive personnel distribution was carried out. Through this method then, the Hafez al-Asad administration tried to exhibit that it was “democratic” and “pluralistic” and that it had an existence beyond major social cleavages.

The second role was the regime’s use of social cleavages based on social classes to build social base of support. For example, the Hafez al-Asad administration forged strong alliances with big landowners and merchants (old bourgeoisie) in Damascus, the traditional governing classes that had been alienated politically and economically after the “Ba’ath Revolution”. He cooperated with the old bourgeoisie when implementing his programme of cautious economic “*infitāh*” (“open door” in English) which widened the gap between Damascus and other cities (regions), among which are Aleppo, Homs, and Hama. Such a measure to overcome social cleavages and classes with those based on regions decreased the power of the traditional governing classes, those whose power stemmed from the more or less equal status of their outlying region. The Hafez al-Asad administration thereby split the traditional governing classes into a pro-government group and an anti-government group (see Fig. 4.5). This allowed the government to use the pro-government group to act as a

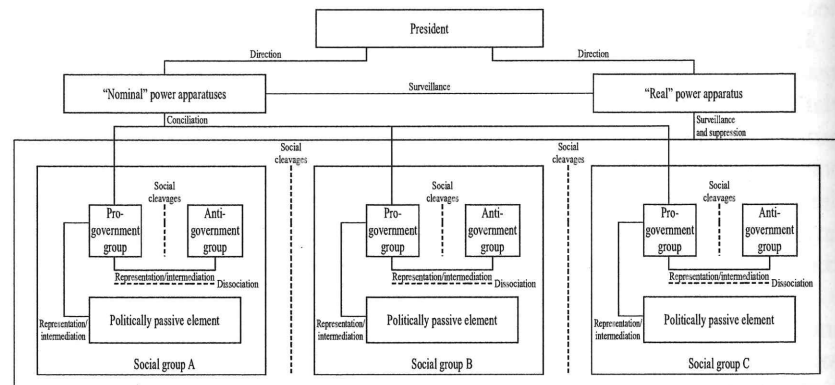


Fig. 4.5 Use/manipulation of social cleavages under the “two-tier power structure”. Source: Author’s analysis

conduit for the anti-government group. In doing so, the government mitigated the building up of resentment on the part of either group: the pro-government group had their business interests looked after, and the anti-government group at least had a line of communication through which to make representations to the administration (Fig. 4.5).

Even after such attempts to expand and strengthen its power base, al-Asad’s administration could not completely suppress dissent. This was also not irrelevant to social cleavages. For example, the main internal confrontation in Syria under the Hafez al-Asad administration was against the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood from the 1970s to the early 1980s. The “Declaration of the Islamic Revolution in Syria and Its Methods” and the “Charter of the Syrian Islamic Front” were announced in November 1980 and January 1981 respectively by the Syrian Islamic Front (formed in October 1980), an anti-government coalition organisation led by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Initially, Islamic rhetoric was toned down slightly in the hope of wider appeal to the populace, but ultimately it simply became a vehicle for extremists led by the Fighting Vanguard who denounced Alawites and minorities. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood also challenged the Ba’ath administration by billing themselves as the representative of farmers and labours and by advocating economic and political liberalisation (Aoyama 1994: 127–134; Lobmeyer 1991).

To sum, countries with authoritarian regimes (especially Eastern European countries where authoritarian regimes were established through the victories of communists over parliamentary democrats) tend to be considered to have lost the linkage between social cleavages and politics (Lawson et al. 1999; Kitschelt et al. 1999). In Syria, however, social cleavages had played a role in politics even under an authoritarian regime.

THE PITFALL SURROUNDING SOCIAL CLEAVAGES

The authoritarian regime based on a “two-tier power structure” in Syria, first established under the rule of Hafez al-Asad, was handed to his son Bashār al-Asad after the death of the former in 2000. Inspired by the “Arab Spring”, protests erupted in Syria in March 2011 and the Bashar al-Asad administration cracked down demonstrations by mobilising its military and security forces. It also embarked upon a series of reforms known as the “Comprehensive Reform Program” (*barnāmaj al-iṣlāḥ al-shāmīl*). This programme consisted of the following laws and regulations: a law for lifting the state of emergency (Law No. 161 of 2011; coming

into force on 22 April 2011), a legislative decree on the abolition of the National Supreme Security Court (Legislative Decree No. 53 of 2011; coming into force on 22 April 2011), the Demonstration Law (Legislative Decree No. 54 of 2011; coming into force on 22 April 2011), a Political Party Law (Legislative Decree No. 100 of 2011; coming into force on 4 August 2011), the General Election Law (Legislative Decree No. 101 of 2011; coming into force on 4 August 2011), the Amended Local Administration Law (Legislative Decree No. 107 of 2011; coming into force on 23 August 2011), and the New Information Law (Legislative Decree No. 108 of 2011; coming into force on 28 August 2011). By implementing such “reforms from above”, the Bashar al-Asad administration tried to compete with the opposition and beat it at its own game.

Furthermore, the Bashar al-Asad government also promulgated a new Constitution on 27 February 2012 in a referendum in which 89.4 per cent of votes were cast in favour of the new Constitution (Aoyama 2012: 91–92). Article 8 of the former Constitution that had stipulated that the Ba’ath Party was the leading party was amended in the new Constitution to the following:

The political system of the state shall be based on the principle of political pluralism, and exercising power democratically through the ballot box... Licensed political parties and constituencies shall contribute to the national political life, and shall respect the principles of national sovereignty and democracy. (Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic 2012)

In addition, Article 9 of the new Constitution made explicit mention of Syria’s diversity as follows:

As a national heritage that promotes national unity in the framework of territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic, the Constitution shall guarantee the protection of cultural diversity of the Syrian society with all its components and the multiplicity of its tributaries. (Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic 2012)

Still no one can speculate on the kind of political order that might emerge out of the conflict and whether it might necessarily bring stability to the country. Moreover, nobody can tell if political transformation through the peace process between the Syrian government and the opposition, referred to as “Geneva Process” which has been advanced by the

initiative of the US and Russia under the auspices of UN will achieve its goal. The only thing which can be said at the moment is that due to the turmoil over the last six and a half years, Syria has faced a situation that may endanger its very survival as a state. For instance, changes in demographics, economy, and social relations due to physical destruction, an outflow of refugees, the rise of militant jihadist groups, the expansion of Kurdish control, and continued apparent interference by foreign countries all endangered Syrian sovereignty. These issues must have no small effect on the connection between social cleavages and politics, whether or not instability continues or order is restored. It is premature to make an assessment at this stage, but it is safe to assume that Syria faces a long and difficult road.

Looking back into the history of the relationship between social cleavages and politics in Syria, we are reminded that there is a well-known pitfall when considering the pros and cons of political change, that is, confusing political pluralism with social/cultural pluralism. Syria’s social cleavages are based on factors that are characteristic to societies such as religion, sect, nationality, and ethnicity. When these are associated with politics, social/cultural pluralism is emphasised rather than political pluralism. The under-emphasis of political pluralism promotes the so-called religious/sectarian conflict, which inhibits national integration, and impairs national function.

In order to avoid this pitfall, post-independence Syria held out an ultra-nationalist ideology: Arab nationalism. However, the reality on the ground was not that cultural pluralism was overcome, but that it was simply excluded from national dialogue. In the 1960s under one-party rule authoritarianism, leaders of the Ba’ath Party excluded rivals as part of their ideological and political fights. As a result, many social groups were robbed of the opportunity to participate in politics. But one is reminded that the intermediation of the cultural identity in politics assumes pro- or anti-imperialist pungency by the degree of balance of forces with imperialism. So, as the world shifted towards the West and neoliberalism, it became self-evident that imperialist ideology will extend to Syria in forms of more acute sectarian politics. Sectarianism as such is an extension of imperialist hegemony.

It may be possible to evaluate the use/manipulation of social cleavages under the “two-tier power structure” established by the Hafez al-Asad administration to “remedy” the process of exclusion. Meanwhile, it can hardly be said that such use/manipulation of social cleavages surpasses the

precedents set in Western Europe where social cleavages and politics have been related to each other under the party political system. It is also possible to state that such use/manipulation of social cleavages in Syria is essentially no more than one-party rule authoritarianism in the 1960s.

The issue to be solved in the Syrian conflict, whether related to armed struggles or political processes, is to seek a new connection between social cleavages and politics while avoiding national disintegration, overconcentration of power, and exclusion. The Syrian government's urgent task is to overcome the difficult challenge, which is securing an integrative political participation by all Syrians.

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