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Here are three pieces: two from The National (Abu Dhabi): one on Turkish views of Syria through a Kurdish lens (I'm sure you've seen some of this but it's an excellent synthesis); another on slowly growing opposition to Assad among Alawites. The third is on Burma's democratization from Tom Carothers, no 2 at Carnegie and one of the best analysts of democratization out there (he started studying Latin America in the late 1980s). All best, AM

Turkey eyes Syrian crisis through lens of Kurdish stability

Maria Fantappie

Turkey appears to be keeping all options open for intervening in Syria - even arming the opposition. But Ankara's failure to monitor the development of the Kurdish issue in Syria, and Bashar Al Assad's struggle for power, have left room for others to instill their agendas there.

In Syria's Kurdish-populated areas, the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party, the PKK, is expanding its military front against Turkey. Leaders in Iraqi Kurdistan are stretching their political influence and campaigning for the establishment of a Kurdish region in Syria.

The PKK and Iraqi Kurdish agendas in Syria could open a Pandora's box of the Kurdish issue in Turkey, furthering Kurdish demands for autonomy and bolstering armed struggle. Turkey is in a state of alarm. It is using all means to influence the situation in Syria to avoid a domestic crisis of its own.

Turkey sees the Kurdish question as the most important threat to its stability. Kurds account for nearly 20 per cent of the Turkish population, and their demands range from the recognition of Kurdish cultural rights to the secession of the Kurdish-populated areas from the Turkish state. Since 2007, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan sought to mitigate this question by granting Kurds some cultural rights, yet still preventing them from attaining significant autonomy and combating separatism.

Turkey saw the fall of the Assad regime as an opportunity to influence Syria's Kurds. Turkey had hoped to oversee negotiations on the Kurdish issue by hosting the Syrian National Council on its soil. Ideally, after Mr Al Assad fell, Kurdish rights would be recognised within "the unity of the Syrian state". Thus, Syria's Kurds would be prevented from gaining any form of autonomy, the PKK's branch in Syria - the Democratic Union Party (PYD) - would be undermined, and Turkey's own Kurdish separatist movement would not be further inflamed. Turkey was relying on the Iraqi Kurds to leverage the Syrian Kurdish parties to accept negotiations.

But Turkey's strategy backfired. Mr Al Assad has not fallen as Turkey wished. The Iraqi Kurds are pushing for their own agenda and Mr Al Assad is fighting back by allowing the PKK free rein in Syria.

The Syrian National Council failed to attract and retain Kurdish members. In January, Kurdish parties withdrew their membership from the Syrian opposition, and 11 of them eventually gathered in the Kurdish National Council under the Iraqi Kurdish umbrella. The Syrian National Council was left with only a few Kurdish members and without legitimacy to form the basis of negotiations.

Under the auspices of the Kurdish National Council, the Iraqi Kurds have expanded their political grip over the Syrian Kurdish parties. Although Kurdish demands in Syria were previously limited to decentralisation, the Kurdish National Council's executive body is calling for a higher degree of autonomy - applying the Iraqi vision of a Kurdish region to Syria.

As the Syrian crisis drags on, the Iraqi Kurds are empowering the Kurdish National Council as the sole representative of Kurdish demands. The Iraqi Kurds are aware that any political entity aspiring to govern Syria in the near future would need the Kurds in order to

establish itself as a legitimate power. The council may raise the stakes and deal only with a counterpart that will accept its demands for a large degree of autonomy.

The PKK is also furthering its agenda and has found in Mr Al Assad a willing ally to consolidate and expand its military front across the Syrian frontier. In the past few months, the party has had carte blanche to conduct its activities in the northwest Syrian district of Afrin, in Aleppo. From Afrin, the PYD is expanding east and opening new offices in the Syrian-Turkish border cities of Ras Al Ayn and Ayn Al Arab. The PKK may now use the expansion of its Syrian branch to establish a military front that stretches from western Syria to eastern Iraq.

Disaffection, fear growing among Syria's Alawites

Phil Sands

DAMASCUS // In the Alawite heartlands of Latakia and the mountainous rural hinterlands surrounding the city, the regime of President Bashar Al Assad still commands overwhelming support, buttressed by patronage networks and deeply entrenched fears of sectarian bloodshed.

But activists in the region say there are signs disaffection with Al Assad family rule is slowly spreading among those outside of privileged elite circles, a discord encapsulated in a new slogan, increasingly heard among ordinary Alawites: "For them the palaces, for us the coffins."

"People are saying, 'how long will we have to bear this', more and more army families are wondering what they are sacrificing their children for, they are starting to say 'where are the martyrs from the Assad family?'," said an Alawite activist from Latakia, a once bustling port and tourist resort on Syria's verdant Mediterranean coastline.

Another influential Alawite opposition figure from a village in the Alawite mountains said dissent had become more pronounced since January, when an elderly Alawite widow buried her son, a soldier killed in the uprising. She had lost her husband and father in conflicts during the 1970s and 1980s under the former president Hafez Al Assad.

"She stood at the funeral and said: 'You Assads have taken my whole family, and all for nothing,'" the activist said. "People sympathised with her. Since then there have been similar sentiments at other funerals - not all of them, but some of them, people are becoming angry, the pressure is rising."

Nonetheless even opposition figures in the region acknowledge most of Syria's Alawites - members of the same obscure Shiite sect as Mr Al Assad and his ruling faction - continue to side with the regime.

"Ninety per cent of the Alawite community in Latakia and the villages support Assad, either because they have direct interests with the regime or because they are terrified," said a leading Alawite dissident.

"Alawites believe they are facing a jihad by Sunni extremists who are coming to chop off their heads, they are really scared of that."

Sectarianism is a thorny and complicated issue in Syria. Long a taboo subject, it has been thrown into sharper focus by a year-long uprising, particularly as an armed rebellion emerges alongside peaceful anti-regime demonstrations.

Many leading opposition activists - including protest organisers - are drawn from Syria's Druze, Christian, Alawite and Ismaili minority communities.

Yet the anti-regime movement has been at its most powerful and militant in areas where Syria's Sunni majority dominates, such as Deraa, Homs, Hama, Deir Ezzor and Idlib.

The opposition has been at pains to stress it is nonsectarian, working to overthrow an abusive and authoritarian regime that has ruled the country for four decades.

But that regime - and the security institutions crucial to its survival - is dominated by Alawites and has cast itself as protectors of secularism and minority groups against Sunni extremism. Officials maintain they are now at war against Al Qaeda-style fanatics aiming to establish a hard line Islamic state in Syria.

"The regime has convinced the minorities it is their protector and it has succeeded in neutralising the Alawites though fear, through linking their destiny to the regime's," said a Christian protester from Latakia city.

"For that reason, the majority [in Latakia] are not involved in the revolution, while they are in many other places, if you go to Hama you have no doubt the revolution will win, but in Latakia it is like a different world compared to the rest of Syria," he said.

Demonstrations, typically involving 100 to 150 young protesters and lasting up to 15 minutes, have stubbornly persisted in Latakia city, although they are confined to a few neighbourhoods and outlying villages, all where Sunnis are in the majority.

Page 2 of 2

To keep public protests at that low level, security forces have been deployed in strength throughout much of the city. Activists say it takes just minutes for dozens of security cars to arrive at the scene of any dissent.

The Ramel neighbourhood, an impoverished Sunni ghetto that was assaulted by security units in August, remains sealed off by heavily fortified checkpoints.

In the heart of Latakia, the school where Hafez Al Assad was educated has been shut down and garrisoned by the army, with hundreds of soldiers and plainclothes security officers on hand to prevent it - or the statue of the former president standing on a plinth outside - from being defaced by opposition activists.

While the regime needs to hold Damascus and Aleppo if it is to remain in power, Latakia, as an unofficial capital for Syria's Alawites, is just as important.

"The regime hasn't reached the point where it feels it is losing in Latakia yet, but it is not comfortable. It is working hard to keep the control it has," said a local doctor who has been supporting protests.

A protest organiser from the city, a 40-year-old engineer, said the opposition was similarly working hard to keep going under immense pressure, including widespread detentions and pervasive surveillance of activists.

"We were weakened by the arrests but we have reorganised and adapted," he said.

As with other parts of Syria, numerous activists in Latakia confirmed an increasing tendency among anti-regime groups to favour taking up weapons, and they reported growing activity by the Free Syrian Army, including raids made from rural areas into the heart of the city to help soldiers trying to defect.

"The regime is weakening slowly, it is breaking up like an iceberg," said another grassroots activist in the region. "But as it has become harder to have peaceful demonstrations, the armed opposition has become stronger and everyone is saying the same thing now - a peaceful uprising alone is not going to topple this regime."

A protester from Ramel, a 23-year-old Sunni, said he would stop peaceful demonstrations and join the armed opposition if it were being supplied with weapons from the West or Arab states.

"It is our right to carry arms and to defend ourselves, don't blame us if that is what we do," said the protester, whose father and brothers have been arrested and held for months and who was himself detained for 50 days. "We want any foreign air force over the skies of Syria to protect us from this regime, let them bomb the presidential palace, we would make a pact with the devil if he could help us get rid of the regime."

Hard-core Alawite loyalists, including the Shabbiheh, a pro-regime militia-cum-smuggling network, have long been armed. Residents of Latakia and outlying villages say the security forces at a minimum turn a blind eye to increasing numbers of Alawites carrying unlicensed weapons.

Others say Alawite villages have been supplied with armaments by the authorities and told to defend themselves against Sunni invaders. Weapons mixed with sectarian animosity have created a dangerous cocktail.

"In the beginning I used to say there was no way a civil war could happen here, that the Syrian people would not do that but after one year, we cannot keep saying the same thing. What we saw in Homs [sectarian violence] is a worry because we have the same mix of sects here in Latakia," the Christian activist said.

The young Sunni protester echoed that alarm. "I'm afraid of a civil war with the Alawites," he said. "They have been fooled by the regime into taking its side and when the regime feels it has reached its end they will murder a lot of people in Latakia, there will be a lot of violence."

A seasoned Alawite dissident gave an equally bleak assessment of the region's, and Syria's, immediate prospects. "We will be dragged into a civil war by this regime, it will be like the Balkans, it will be Bosnia all over again."

Is Burma Democratizing?

Thomas Carothers Q&A, April 2, 2012



The victory of Aung San Suu Kyi and several dozen of her National League for Democracy colleagues in Burma's April 1 legislative by-elections is a major event for the country.

In a Q&A, Thomas Carothers, who visited Burma in the run-up to the elections, assesses the significance of the vote and the prospects for a democratic transition in Burma. Drawing on his extensive experience with political transitions around the world, Carothers compares the situation in Burma to other transitions away from authoritarian rule, highlighting major challenges but also reasons for hope.

Is Burma transitioning to democracy?

Although the elections involved fewer than 7 percent of the seats in the country's parliament, they were unquestionably a big step forward for a society that has experienced only manipulated or nullified elections for more than half a century.

Burma is experiencing a striking and largely unpredicted political opening, marked by the return to political life of Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy, the release of many political prisoners, and the opening up of considerable space for political discussion and activity. President Thein Sein, although in power thanks to the military establishment and illegitimate elections in 2010, appears to have taken reform to heart. When I visited Burma last month, it was impossible not to be struck by the powerful sense among many Burmese that this is an enormous moment for the country, a political opportunity that many barely dared to hope for over the last twenty years.

Encouraging as they are, however, these developments represent only a doorway to a possible democratic transition. The country's power holders—a long-entrenched, antidemocratic military and the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP)—have not yet given up any significant structural levers of power. Constitutional reform, essential to undoing the longstanding lock on power of the military and the USDP, is only just starting to be discussed seriously. The weight of the reformers in the government relative to those in the government and the military who oppose reforms is still highly uncertain.

While the government has initiated some encouraging economic reforms, notably the rationalization of currency exchange and reform of the banking system, it remains to be seen whether it can implement changes that would challenge the core prerogatives of the existing ruling establishment, an establishment whose economic approach defines the concept of crony capitalism.

So political opening? Yes. Economic reform? Likely. Democratic transition? Too early to tell.

What can we learn from other transitions away from authoritarian rule? How do they compare to Burma?

Every political transition is of course unique, reflecting the almost unlimited variety of sociopolitical configurations and traditions around the world. At the same time, with over 100 attempted democratic transitions occurring during the past twenty-five years, certain patterns are identifiable and certain analogies, if approached cautiously, can be illuminating.

Burma's reform-from-above process—in which softliners in a military-based authoritarian power establishment worried about its legitimacy are attempting an unfolding set of iterative political and economic reforms—is reminiscent of at least some of the transitions away from military rule in South America in the 1970s and 1980s, though these varied greatly even compared to each other.

In Brazil, for example, a military establishment concerned about its waning popularity—which had been undercut by poor economic management and florid corruption—broke into softliner and hardliner camps. The softliners gradually reintroduced civilian rule, followed by credible electoral processes, and kept peace with the hardliners by allowing them to retain many of their economic prerogatives and avoid prosecution for their past wrongs.

Most of the South American transitions look fairly good in retrospect, but it is important to note how long and turgid they mostly were in practice. In Brazil again, more than ten years elapsed from the opening of political reform in 1974 until a civilian president took power through credible elections. And it was almost another ten years after that until the system really worked through many of the toxic legacies of previous authoritarianism.

In addition, most of the South American militaries had only been in power for a decade or two when they returned their countries to civilian rule and these countries had at least some significant past experience with civilian rule and democratic pluralism. The Burmese military has been running the country for fifty of the country's sixty-five years of independence, and there is no extended prior democratic experience to draw from.

Has the Arab Spring impacted the developments in Burma?

One does hear in the country that the Arab Spring rattled the Burmese generals and also fueled the softliners' determination to move ahead with reforms in an attempt to head off a potential explosion from below.

The top-down reform process in Burma, however, more closely resembles the political situation in many Arab countries in the decade leading up to the Arab Spring. In those years, various Arab governments carried out political and economic reforms—allowing opposition parties to gain representation in parliaments, permitting a certain space for independent civil society, and rationalizing some elements of economic life—in what analysts characterized as “defensive liberalization.”

The steps taken by Arab governments were not democratizing reforms, rather they were carefully circumscribed efforts designed precisely to head off the possibility of true democratization by alleviating popular dissatisfaction with regimes. Some regimes, such as those in Morocco and Jordan, have managed to stay in place by persisting with such a strategy. Others, like in Egypt, faltered in the reforms, stagnating until they faced an eventual explosion.

What will be the most difficult part of Burma's transition?

Difficulties certainly abound—a deeply entrenched, antidemocratic military internally divided over its commitment to reform, devastating legacies of political repression, atrocious governance, economic deprivation, and a politically challenging region.

But what is especially daunting is that the country is confronting the profound challenge of moving away from fifty years of harsh, haphazard authoritarian rule while also grappling with the need to resolve the multiple

aggravated ethnic conflicts that have festered for decades. Trying to work simultaneously through two interrelated processes of the distribution of power—democratization at the core of the political system and greater regional autonomy in sizeable parts of the country—will be extremely difficult. It is a bit like trying to drive across a narrow, badly paved bridge with steep drops on either side while at the same time struggling to stop a fight with a whole set of angry passengers inside the car.

But it's not impossible. If handled well, the two processes could be complementary. When Indonesia moved suddenly away from authoritarian rule in the late 1990s, many people worried that it would not be able to handle democratization while dealing with the push for greater autonomy in some of its provinces. Indonesia arguably faced greater internal problems at the time than Burma confronts today, as some of its internal territorial struggles were about secession whereas in Burma the demands from the ethnic areas are more limited. But Indonesia did make it through, and the end of the authoritarian regime actually facilitated a peaceful resolution with Timor-Leste.

Is there reason to be hopeful about Burma's future?

Burma faces enormous challenges in undertaking democratization, but it is far from a lost cause. Few countries entering into a political opening do so with a vibrant, clearly pro-democratic opposition movement that has already proven its national appeal in prior elections, has a deeply respected leader of unquestionable national and international legitimacy, and has at least a certain amount of basic organizational capability.

Moreover, the reform wing in the power establishment contains some very credible figures, not the least of which is President Thein Sein himself. And although some countries in Burma's neighborhood are not likely to be friends of the democratization process, a wide range of important international actors, including the United States, Europe, and various Asian democracies, are ready to help

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