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WHY SYRIA'S CRISIS IS POLITICAL IN NATURE

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Eight months after the beginning of a countrywide popular revolt in Syria, many analysts and commentators continue to privilege economic issues as the main reason for the uprising. This factor is not only cited in the case of Syria but for the unrest gripping the entire Middle East region.

The fact that protests erupted initially in the southern city of Daraa, in a region affected by years of drought, poverty and emigration, and that it then spread to the poverty belt around Damascus and to areas affected by neglect and lack of government investment, partly explains that. Another reason is the insistence of the Syrian authorities on the economic problems facing the country and the fact that all the initial measures they took pointed in that direction: an increase in civil servants' pay, a reduction in the price of gas oil – used for heating – a reduction in taxes and customs tariffs of key food items, etc.

However, from the very beginning of the unrest protesters made it clear. They wanted no economic reform measures and would compromise for nothing other than drastic political change.

A few days following the beginning of the demonstrations on 18th March, government officials met with activists in Daraa. Besides demands related to local issues, the latter had a number of other requests: the release of all political prisoners, the end of the Emergency Law and an end to the constant screenings required from the security services to process almost any sort of everyday transaction. This set of demands surprised many. Not only did protesters have a surprisingly high level of political maturity — in a society totally deprived of any form of political activity for decades — but they also prioritised matters that affected Syrian society at large, such as the lifting of the State of Emergency, at the expense of more local and economic issues.

On 25th March, one day following the announcement of a string of social measures by Bouthaina Shaaban, the political and media advisor of the Syrian President, protesters were heard chanting: "Oh Bouthaina Shaaban, the people are not hungry (in Arabic the word for hungry – Jou'an – rhymes with Shaaban); the people want freedom."

The economic and social crisis the majority of Syrians have been living through since the early 1980s must not of course be understated.

Until then and for several decades in a row the Syrian economy had been a centralised economy with the state playing a key role in planning and investment as well as in the provision of key social services. This overwhelming role taken by the government began in 1958 when Syria and Egypt united under a single state and continued under the Baath Party when it rose to power in 1963; that role enabled the expansion across Syria of health, education and other social services as well as the development of the water, electricity and drainage networks. Rural areas in particular, which had been largely neglected until then by the urban elite that had governed the country for centuries, received significant attention.

Gradually, over the course of two decades, incomes rose, a growing number of people were taken out of poverty, and illiteracy rates fell.

However, in line with other countries from the former Soviet bloc, Syria's macro-economic conditions started to deteriorate gradually. The large capital surpluses generated by the Gulf oil boom and that were reinvested across the Middle East region, including in Syria, began to dry up while at the same time the large public sector began to be affected by red tape and corruption.

Eventually, the Syrian pound was devalued in 1986. This event was a turning point for the economy and for society at large, which witnessed from then on a general decline in revenues — coupled with a growing income gap — as well as a gradual retreat of the state from the economic and social spheres, which continues to this day.

While timid efforts to liberalise the economy then began, they took a serious turn only in the late 1990s, with the opening of new sectors to private investment, the liberalisation of the financial industry and the signing of free trade agreements with neighbouring countries.

This combination of measures, formalised by the Baath Party in 2005 under the "social market" economic development model, had some successes, in particular for Syria's urban middle classes. New services were introduced into the country, such as banking and insurance; shopping centres were filled with a broad choice of goods, something Syrians had been deprived of for decades. Economic liberalisation also helped attract private investment from Syrian expatriates and Gulf tycoons — although FDI levels remained well below those in Lebanon and Jordan, two much smaller neighbours.

However, unchecked liberalisation and the retreat of the state also had dire effects. Real incomes continued to fall; foreign trade agreements destroyed manufacturing jobs, in particular in the labour-intensive textile industry; while traditional sectors of the economy, such as agriculture, became increasingly neglected.

More significant for the relation between the rulers and the governed was the depreciation of the role of the state and the loss of its role as a provider of services but also as a social integrator. The centralisation of economic and political powers in the urban centres and the growing role of services in the economy also led to the alienation of large segments of the population.

The neglect of agriculture is a good symptom of these changes. While it had been over-privileged for decades by a Baath Party that drew most of its constituency from the rural areas, the agricultural sector has suffered tremendously in the last few years at the hands of a government that sought to divest as much as possible from the management of the economy and that had little oversight over funds and projects being managed far away from Damascus.

When a severe drought began to impact the country in 2007, the government was in the midst of a plan to reduce subsidies for agricultural inputs. Instead of listening to calls to take the plight of farmers into account, the government abruptly raised the price of fertilisers to world market levels, while the retail price of gas oil – which is used by farmers to run irrigation and other engines – increased threefold.

While in 2003 the agricultural sector represented 25% of GDP and employed around 20% of the labour force, in 2011 these ratios had come down to 20 and 16% respectively. To cap it all, the Minister of Agriculture that had been in charge throughout this period, Adel Safar, was appointed Prime Minister in April 2011.

The deteriorating economic conditions therefore provided fertile ground for the discontent of the Syrian population that expressed itself at the beginning of this year.

There is, however, a missing link that explains why the protesters express no economic demands during their demonstrations and why, in practice, very large parts of the Syrian population, across all social classes and conditions, support the protest movement, even though many remain silent or at home.

The appointment of Mr Safar as Prime Minister serves as a good example to highlight one important fact: despite all the mismanagement of the agricultural sector, neither Mr Safar nor any other government official had been sacked or made responsible for the disaster that afflicted this sector and large sways of land and population in Syria's north-eastern region. Accountability was a word that did not seem to exist in the government's dictionary.

Similarly, much of the mismanagement of the economy can be attributed to the systemic corruption of the state. To get a job with the public sector, a grant from your university, to earn a contract or to get a license to import, buy or sell hosts of items or properties, you are required to pay a bribe to a government official, a member of the security services, a customs officer or a civil servant. A defendant in a court action can be sure to lose his case if he is not well connected; an importer will not get his products released from customs if he does not bribe; etc.

An overwhelming sense of unaccountability and lack of responsibility across the state and its institutions – including the judicial system – has been driving a no less overwhelming sense of despair and hopelessness among the population.

Here, before anything else, is the underlying driver of Syria's uprising. No matter how little politicised they are, Syrians have understood one thing. If they want a better future for themselves and their children they need to take back matters into their hands and re-introduce the values of accountability and responsibility for the people in charge of their daily lives. Political change will lead to economic well being, not the other way round.

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