

Syria: Prospects for Transition from Minority to Majority Rule

Written by Mark N. Katz

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MARK N. KATZ, JUN 16 2012

The Assad regime in Syria is not simply a dictatorship. Largely drawn from Syria's Alawite minority community (13% of the country's population), the Assad regime is also the instrument through which this minority rules over the rest of the country—including the majority Sunni community (74% of the population). This fact complicates the prospects for a democratic transition in Syria.

In a country with a dictatorship with roots in its ethnic and/or religious majority, the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule does not change the existing pattern of ethnic/religious dominance—including that prevailing in the security services. But in a country with a dictatorship rooted in an ethnic and/or religious minority, the transition from minority authoritarian to either democratic or majority authoritarian rule upends the existing pattern of ethnic/religious dominance—including that prevailing in the security services. Ruling minorities, then, are especially reluctant to allow a transition to majority rule for fear that they will lose everything, including control of the security services, economic advantages, and even personal security. Thus, while the security services rooted in the majority communities in Tunisia and Egypt acquiesced to the downfall of unpopular authoritarian rulers, the Syrian security services, whose officer corps is dominated by the minority Alawite community, have fought doggedly to protect the unpopular Assad regime.

The experience of other countries, though, suggests that while minority rule can last for many years or even decades, it is inherently unstable and in the long run can give way to majority rule. Transitions from long entrenched minority rule to majority rule have occurred, for example, in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe in 1980, in South Africa in 1994, and in Iraq during the American-led occupation that began in 2003.

These three transitions from minority to majority rule occurred in different ways. In Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, the transition was facilitated by a conflict resolution process that resulted in the temporary return of British colonial rule, free elections open to the previously excluded majority, and temporary guarantees for the previously dominant minority. In South Africa, a conflict resolution process occurred that also resulted in free elections in which the previously excluded majority participated and more comprehensive guarantees for the previously dominant white minority. In Iraq, the U.S. toppled Saddam Hussein's Arab Sunni minority regime and then held elections which parties and leaders from the Arab Shi'a majority won.

Could any of these transitions to majority rule serve as a model for Syria? This appears to be unlikely. The temporary return of French or Turkish colonial rule to Syria (similar to the temporary return of British rule to Rhodesia) is unlikely to be an appealing idea not only to the warring parties in Syria, but also to the French and Turkish governments. Nor has there yet emerged the Syrian equivalent of Nelson Mandela, who helped ease the transition to majority rule through reassuring the minority giving up power that its rights would be respected and protected. Finally, the U.S. has not shown any willingness to undertake the costly effort of intervening in Syria—either with or (as in Iraq) without UN Security Council approval—to topple the minority regime and hold elections allowing the majority to come to power. No other country appears willing or able to undertake this task either.

Absent the circumstances that facilitated the transition to majority rule in Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Iraq, the

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prospects for such a transition in Syria appear to be extremely poor. Outgunned by the forces of the heavily armed minority regime, the opposition majority is not in a position to defeat it. However, the opposition majority's surprising ability not only to avoid defeat by the regime but also to become increasingly stronger might eventually wear down the Alawite minority's confidence that the Assad regime can restore order. It is at this point that significant elements within the Alawite community might be amenable to a conflict resolution process involving a transition to majority rule that provides meaningful protections for the Alawites as well as other minority groups in Syria. The emergence of a Syrian Nelson Mandela as well as support from the international community would greatly facilitate this.

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