

Bashar al-Assad: A Machiavellian Prince?

Written by Tom Moylan

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TOM MOYLAN, JAN 27 2013

The purpose of this essay is to illustrate that although Bashar al-Assad's actions in regards can be linked to some of the themes and principles in Machiavelli's writings, a full understanding of Machiavellian literature shows us that the two are not very similar in their attitudes towards what a ruler should do. Dietz suggests that there are three main ways to read Machiavelli, and for the purposes of this essay we will be adopting the third manner she mentions by taking what Machiavelli says at face value (Dietz 1986, p.780). The point of this essay will be made by taking each of Machiavelli's main themes in his writings and comparing them to the actions Assad has taken throughout the conflict so far. The only major theme not included here is 'free will' as it does not apply to the situation. The weaknesses of each argument will then be examined, and addressed where possible. This essay will not be a moral evaluation of the approaches of either man, but simply a discussion of the similarities and differences between them.

One of Machiavelli's overarching themes is that of goodwill and hatred, and the importance of striking the appropriate balance (Dietz 1986, p.783-784). By goodwill and hatred Machiavelli is talking about the people's attitude towards those in power. Machiavelli divorced these two things from morality and viewed them in a purely clinical way, in how they are tools that can be used by a ruler to achieve goals (this we will consider further later). The first major protests began in March 2012, and almost immediately there were reports of unarmed protesters being shot. On 22 April 2011, relatively early in the uprising 72 protesters were killed by security forces firing into crowds (BBC July 2012). "Upon this a question arises: whether it be better to be loved than feared or feared than loved? It may be answered that one should wish to be both, but, because it is difficult to unite them in one person, is much safer to be feared than loved" (Machiavelli 1515, p.79). In light of this quote one might consider the actions of Assad to be justified by Machiavelli. Through this violent and immediate reaction he was instilling fear in the people as opposed to trying to appease them.

However Machiavelli also states "Nevertheless a prince ought to inspire fear in such a way that, if he does not win love, he avoids hatred..." (Machiavelli 1515, p.80). It seems clear that Assad's immediate recourse to violence was not the action of a man trying to avoid hatred. Furthermore, on 3 October 2011, after months of violent crackdowns and growing unrest, opposition groups formed the Syrian national council and pledged to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad (BBC July 2012). Before this point the protests and groups against the government were generally disorganized. It was the hate that Assad sowed in them through actions such as the massacre on 25 May (when many women and children were killed by government forces and their allies (BBC July 2012)) that drove them together into a larger, more structured opposition. However it is possible to argue that we cannot judge whether the hatred of Assad will or will not be overcome by the fear his actions cause without giving more time to see how the conflict develops. In response to this I argue that if one considers the high number of defectors from the Syrian army at all ranks, from generals to privates, in light of the risks and consequences of defection, and the formation of a more coherent opposition it is safe to assume that the Syrian public are firmly against Assad's actions (BBC August 2012), and therefore he has caused hatred that would make him decidedly un-Machiavellian.

The next theme of Machiavelli's we will compare and contrast with Assad's behaviour in regards to the conflict is that of statesmanship and war (Dietz p.782). Machiavelli considered mastery of war key to the skills of a ruler, and goes as far as to state that "The chief foundations of all states, new as well as old or composite, are good laws and good arms" (Machiavelli 1515, p.56). Although Assad briefly offered conciliations after the first protests in March 2011, his main methods of responding to the unrest from the beginning have been through the use of the military (BBC October

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2012). When we examine these actions along with points Machiavelli makes such as “A prince ought to have no other aim or thought, nor select anything else for his study, than war and its rules and discipline” (Machiavelli 1515, p.67), one might be forgiven to think that Assad is acting as the Italian would recommend. He has, after all, seemed to have thought little of anything but military action in his response to opposition. However Machiavelli makes clear throughout ‘The Prince’ that the mastery of the art of war is more than just military maneuvers, encompassing areas such as international relations, domestic affairs, history and geography.

Machiavelli also states that “Whosoever makes war, whether from policy or ambition, means to acquire and to hold what he acquires, and to carry on the war he has undertaken in such a manner that it shall enrich and not impoverish his native country and State” (Machiavelli 1531, p.188). Assad’s actions have included a sustained month-long bombardment of Homs from February to March of 2012, massacres in Taldou in May 2012 and in the Idlib province in December 2011, and a host of other actions damaging the infrastructure and population of Syria (BBC July 2012). These are actions that are clearly impoverishing the state. It is possible to argue that these undertakings would have been justified by Machiavelli in that they are sustaining order in the state, and that order and maintenance of the government are more important than a few buildings or people. That bourn in mind, I would argue that the massacres and destruction of cities, property and infrastructure are not only creating impoverishment now but for future generations also, and therefore would not be justified in Machiavelli’s eyes. It must be accepted however that again this point is limited by the fact that one cannot compare present problems with future problems until one encounters them, and therefore one cannot definitively say that Assad’s actions will not be justified and cannot definitively rule out that they will not be viewed as Machiavellian retrospectively. It is not just problems with future impoverishment that put these activities at odds with Machiavelli’s principles as we will see in the next paragraph.

The concepts of virtue and vice are the next theme of Machiavelli’s we will reflect on. Virtues and vices were to be considered in the same way as goodwill and fear, as tools a ruler can use for the good of the state. This quote by Femia on Machiavelli’s beliefs states this quite nicely, “Effective reality not normative ideals, should be (and generally is) the main determinant of behaviour; and that therefore ‘universal’ moral concepts such as ‘human rights’, ‘democracy’ or ‘justice’ should be treated with suspicion and not allowed to guide policy” (Femia 2005, p.345). From March to April in attempts to placate the growing number of the public demonstrating against the regime Assad offered concessions to the protesters and the government resigned (Al Jazeera 2012). This could be considered as Assad trying to be viewed as a fair and just leader. Machiavelli says “that every prince ought to desire to be considered clement and not cruel” (Machiavelli 1515, p.78), and he follows this with the warning that “he ought to take care not to misuse this clemency” (Machiavelli 1515, p.78). Here one could assume that Assad is acting in accordance to this advice in that he tried to appear virtuous and after it’s failure took the Machiavellian route of not being overly kind and proceeding to crack down on the people.

Still, it has been reported, that through this period where prisoners were released, the government resigned, and laws were brought in to appease the public, that Assad’s forces continued to kill protesters (Al Jazeera 2012, BBC July 2012). Also, many of the things that Assad did to appease the people, including closing Syria’s one casino and removing a law banning female teachers wearing the niqab in the classroom (Al Jazeera 2012), seem like paltry gestures when compared to the demands actually made by the people. One could argue that Assad only tried to appear virtuous as a tool and resorted to vices when they were clearly needed in the face of growing opposition, which would be in line with Machiavellian principles. In spite of that Machiavelli said a leader “ought to be slow to believe and to act, nor should he himself show fear, but proceed in a temperate manner with prudence and humanity” (Machiavelli 1515, p.79). Considering this it is I would say that it fairly clear that Assad is relying too heavily on vices and cruelty, though it must be accepted that there are strong arguments on both sides of this point. The wisdom in the use of virtues and vices is inseparably linked with another key characteristic a leader should have in Machiavelli’s opinion; foresight (Jackson and Sørensen 2003, p.73).

“The Romans did in these instances what all prudent princes ought to do, who have to regard not only with present troubles, but also future ones” (Machiavelli 1515, p.9-10). This theme is perhaps one of the most difficult to judge in regards to evaluating it’s use in Assad’s actions in that it is subjective until we see the outcome. Despite this limiting factor, one can certainly speculate in light of the facts on what likely outcomes there are. Assad may be using these violent crackdowns in order to nip future problems in the bud. His father, Hafez al-Assad, had a long history of

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successfully suppressing uprisings and protests with force, such as in 1973 when he dropped the constitutional requirement that the president must be a Muslim, or in 1982 when the military reputedly killed tens of thousands of civilians (BBC October 2012). These approaches in the past proved successful, so it would be fair to argue that they continue to be valid now. That said, the overwhelming disapproval and condemnation of the international community in the UN was expressed when “the 193-nation assembly approved the Saudi-drafted non-binding resolution, which expressed “grave concern” at the escalation of violence in Syria, with 133 votes in favor, 12 against and 31 abstentions” (Reuters August 2012) makes it hard to believe that Assad is considering the repercussions of his actions fully.

At the end of the day however, state sovereignty is the foundation of international law and as long as the Syrian government’s friends on the Security Council continue to veto action in Syria International condemnation matters very little. Also, the fact that the US threatened to take action if chemical weapons were used and the Assad regime’s response that they would only be used in response to ‘external aggression’ (Reuters August 2012) show that there is a line drawn for both sides, perhaps what could even be considered an ‘out’ in terms of the US’s responsibility. This shows foresight in that Assad has effectively secured assurances from the US that they won’t directly interfere upon this condition, and secured a justification for their use of chemical weapons in the event of the US invading. So perhaps he is acting with Machiavellian foresight considering the impotence of international condemnation and the history of violent suppression in the country. Also judging that Machiavelli said that “one has to remark that men ought either to be well treated or crushed, because they can avenge themselves of lighter injuries, of more serious ones they cannot; therefore the injury that is to be done to a man ought to be of such a kind that one does not stand in fear of revenge” (Machiavelli, 1515 p.7-8), it may be that in this sphere Assad is acting in a Machiavellian manner. In summation, there are strong arguments for Assad being and not being Machiavellian here, and when it comes to discussing the topic of foresight, it is only time that will definitively tell whether he is acting with the appropriate balance of prudence and decisiveness that Machiavelli recommends.

The final theme that will be looked at is that of human nature. It is on this point that Assad’s conduct in reality and Machiavelli’s theoretical conceptions intersect most, whereas in the previous points there has been either outright contradiction or at the very least an air of ambivalence. “The nature of the people is variable, and whilst it is easy to persuade them, it is difficult to fix them in that persuasion. And thus it is necessary to take such measures that, when they believe no longer, it may be possible to make them believe by force.” (Machiavelli 1515, p.26). In this quote it can be seen that Machiavelli considered fear and punishment the only surefire way to control men, which in some way would justify Assad’s kneejerk violent reactions to demonstrations. Femia also states in relation to Machiavelli’s beliefs in his works that “human beings do not always respond to rational inducements and arguments, and that the flaws in human nature make conflict and hierarchy an inescapable reality” (Femia 2005, p.345). This would go further in vindicating Assad’s violent control of the people. Machiavelli’s works are packed with discussion of the deceitful nature of men and how the use of force, fear and pain are the best ways to control them.

The strongest argument that could be brought forth to challenge the convergence of their outlooks here comes very nicely packaged in this excerpt from *The Prince*: “And when neither their property nor honour is touched, the majority of men live content, and he has only to contend with the ambition of a few, whom he can curb with ease in many ways” (Machiavelli 1515, p.88). One could argue that before the conflict even began, through the constant arrests and persecution of his political opponents and through the confiscation of land from groups such as the Kurds (Reuters November 2012), Assad was not heeding Machiavelli’s advice on human nature and how people should be treated. However, they do seem to agree on this point in many key areas.

In conclusion, we can see that Machiavelli’s recommendations and Assad’s actions diverge in a number of key areas. This is most notable in the areas of goodwill and hatred, of statesmanship and war, and of virtues and vices. It must also be conceded that in certain ways Assad is acting in a Machiavellian manner, especially considering the themes of foresight and human nature, and that Assad cannot be judged effectively without seeing how the conflict plays out in its entirety. All in all, even with the similarities and ambiguities caused by our having to wait to look at the outcomes of the situation, the differences between Machiavelli and Assad in their approaches are stark enough that when compared Bashar al-Assad cannot be considered a true Machiavellian realist.

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Written by: Tom Moylan
Written at: Dublin City University
Written for: Kenneth McDonagh

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