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Syria

Fighting for Marxism in Syria

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Monif Mulhem was born in 1959 and joined the Communist Action Party (CAP) at the end of the 1970s. In the CAP communists of different tendencies worked together, while the official CP participated in the Syrian government with the Ba'ath party. In 1980, Monif joined the Fourth International. In 1981, he was imprisoned along with thousands of Communist dissidents and Islamists. He spent 16 consecutive years in Syrian jails. He could have been released much sooner if he had promised the Syrian authorities that he would stop his political activities.

Upon his release from prison in 1997, he threw himself into the construction of a global justice movement in Syria. After some successful Social Forums, the Syrian authorities banned them. Today, Monif continues political activity in a tense situation. IV spoke to him in his small apartment in Damascus.

How did you become a revolutionary activist?

After secondary school, I joined the army like many young people of my generation, shaken by the defeat of the Arab armies by the Israeli Zionist army. But I was thrown out of the army in 1973, for Marxism. The army was dominated by the Ba'athists. I worked for a year and a half in Halep, in a motorcycle workshop, and then in the chemical engineering industry.

In 1974, I helped initiate a Marxist workers' circle. After Syria's defeat, many youth like me left the Stalinist Communist Party and organized outside of it. They were motivated by the situation in Palestine and the Palestinian resistance. Many began to work with Habash's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and with Hawatmeh's Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). The Marxist currents had a great resonance among Syrian youth.

In 1976, this rise of the left led to the birth of the CAP. Seven months later, I was already working underground at the request of the party to carry out political tasks. At the end of the 1970s, we began to be recognized as a Trotskyist group inside the CAP. We found ourselves to the left of the CAP, which was itself positioned to the left of the CP. In 1978 I was elected to the political bureau of the CAP. At the party's 1981 congress the theses of our Trotskyist group obtained 25% of the vote, which considerably increased our weight. I was arrested two days after the congress. I was released from prison in 1997.

Why did you not join the governmental front with the Baath Party and the CP?

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Syrian_army_-b.jpg]

Syrian army maintains tight grip

The coming to power of the Ba'ath in 1968 was a surprise for Syrians. The Ba'ath was first built among the peasantry. As the bourgeoisie was incapable of resolving the social, health or education questions the Baath was able to build a very broad popular base. That was how it came to power, in alliance with the Nasserites.

Then they politically liquidated the Nasserites to govern alone. The Ba'ath is a party that contains currents going from left to far right. After the seizure of power the Ba'ath carried out a programme of social policy with agrarian reform. In 1970 Hafez Al-Assad came to power through a coup inside the Baath. His policy was openly orientated towards the bourgeoisie.

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Having won the popular masses, he was able to allow himself to work with a whole series of parties, like the official CP, the Nasserites and the religious currents. Assad was able to domesticate all the political currents, right and left. He did not integrate them into the Ba'ath, but to the politics of the Baath.

When the governmental Front was established in 1970 with the Ba'ath, the other parties in the front had no independence inside it. Even in the Constitution, it is written that the Ba'ath is the sole party in power.

All the other parties integrated in the governmental front lost any capacity for political activity. Certainly, the CAP's entering the governmental front was impossible given the latter's pro-capitalist policy. The Ba'ath had tried in the 1970s to integrate us in the governmental front, organizing a congress of national unity.

But the CAP refused because of the internal policy of the government and the intervention of the Syrian army in Lebanon in 1976.

Between 1970 and 1976 we witnessed the emergence of a new bourgeoisie constituted by the cadres of the state. They profited from their position as an elite allied to the weakened old bourgeoisie. The classic bourgeoisie was weakened in the 1960s by the radical policies of the Ba'ath. We could not then join this governmental front with the Ba'ath and the CP without endorsing their pro-capitalist and authoritarian policy.

Moreover, the confrontation between the regime and the Islamists began at the end of the 1970s and we refused to ally ourselves with Assad against the Islamists. At the time that would have been suicide. We could support neither a corrupt and dictatorial regime, nor a religious, reactionary and sanguinary movement.

The country lost a lot in the confrontation between the regime and the Islamists. First because it ended in bloodbaths, as at Hama in 1982 with 25,000 deaths from bombardment, but also because dialogue became virtually impossible. The regime was afraid. And this ended in a massacre. There were other massacres for which the Islamists were responsible.

In this period, the CAP was distinguished by its dynamism and the number of youth in the party who were prepared to sacrifice themselves. Two thousand of them were arrested in 1978. This was not a small number for the time. Six months after the creation of the CAP in 1977, there was a first wave of repression. Many CAP cadres were imprisoned because of their political activism. The regime thought that it had finished off the CAP, but some weeks later the activities resumed, leading to a new wave of repression, a new cycle of actions and so on.

That greatly embittered the regime. Repression hit the CAP more than any other organization because after the repression of the Islamists, we were alone in maintaining a permanent activity, with newspapers, assemblies and meetings.

In 1988 repression hit broad layers of the party, not just the leadership. There remained only a small group outside the prisons. The CAP members were distinguished by an activism inside the prisons, even if we were moved from one prison to another. That continued until 1990, until the collapse of the Eastern bloc.

After long years of prison and the transformations in the Eastern bloc, there were many changes inside the party. Many activists renounced their Marxist ideas and became pro-capitalists. Some even began to consider imperialism as a factor of development for humanity. In the party there was disarray. The regime offered us a bargain, promising to free us if we no longer carried out political activity.

This was offered to me after six years. I refused. Five years later there was a new attempt, but I refused again. Since it could not make us accept these conditions for being freed, the regime finally tried us - we were neither charged nor tried up until then - before the state Supreme Court which condemned us to very long sentences, as long as 20 years.

In 1991, the first war against Iraq revealed the depth of the divergences among militants. It was the deathblow for the CAP. Syria grew close to the United States. Since the 1980s, enormous changes have taken place, everywhere on a planetary scale, except in Syria and in the Arab region.

Three factors can explain it:

1. the internal confrontations, particularly that with the Islamists;
2. the fear that Israel represents for the countries of the region which creates a rallying of the people around the policy of their leaders;
3. the role of Europe and the US who have more interest in the stability of the region whatever the price for the peoples. The main reason is oil and the necessity for Europe and the USA to control it.

The break up of the Eastern bloc did not stop Europe and the US from supporting the existing regimes, even if they were not totally faithful to them, like Syria and Iraq. A US specialist has said that 60 years of dictatorship is worth more than a year of instability. These factors have prevented the region from democratizing itself, despite the small openings of recent years. For example, the Syrian prisons contained thousands of prisoners in the 1980s. Today there are a little less than a thousand.

What space is there for the left today in Syria? Is there a democratic opening with the new president?

In 2000, Hafez Al-Assad was in the 30th year of his reign. During all this time, he had kept Syria under a grip of steel. But after the Cold War, Syria entered a phase of regression. After the Madrid agreement, the US reduced their pressure on it, as they hoped for a normalization of Syrian-Israeli relations.

They also pushed neoliberal policies with projects that were realized through the destruction of the public sector, and privatization. That has greatly impoverished the peasants and workers and enriched the bourgeoisie, thanks to corruption and privatization. The political and sociological landscape of Syria has changed. Moral values have also changed.

The year 2000 was one of the worst. The political organizations had no space to act. The cadres were in prison. The parties who made up the governmental front had lost all credibility and the Ba'ath party itself had greatly shrunk. The regime had fallen into the hands of a small military and security elite. The situation with the new president Bashar Al-Assad is radically different. There are some spaces today in Syria that we can use, but of course they are marginalized and barely tolerated.

There is no state of law, there is no legal protection. Our work is public, but every time the security forces arrest us, question us, imprison us, we have no recourse. Several of our young activists have been arrested. One of them is still in prison and will be brought before the Supreme Security Court.

The worst thing is that the dictatorship has instilled a fear of all political activity. It is hard to explain that when you decide to fight for basic civil rights you have to accept being arrested. Political parties aren't authorized and neither are associations. As long as Syrians live under the yoke of fear and repression, they cannot be active in the movement.

You are active in the global justice movement in Syria. Is this a new space in which to carry out political activity?

When Hafez Al-Assad died and his son came to power, the situation was fairly unstable. But after only a few months, the regime controlled everything once again. Some changes appeared, for example the will to put an end to this sort of civil war between the regime and the Islamist extremists.

The first sign of this détente was the “Damascus spring”. All kinds of forums sprang up. Some were sponsored by the regime but there were also of forums on human rights, and we succeeded in setting up a forum on the global justice movement. Some left activists, including Trotskyists like me and young militants, succeeded in developing an alternative discourse. Our global justice forum held 16 sessions.

After the first sessions, the security services demanded we suspend our activities. Of course we refused. We continued to discuss for four months with the authorities. During this time, the regime ensured that there was no other room available for our meetings. We were obliged to stop. Our forum was not only about global justice. It had three goals: to build an organization that fights against capitalist globalization, to build a new left in Syria and to struggle for a democratic transformation.

With a small group, we began to edit a bulletin, carried out non-authorized actions against the Iraq war and in support of the Intifada in Palestine, fought for the liberation of prisoners and the elaboration of an anti-neoliberal programme. We set up an internet site and our movement evolved in a very satisfying manner. Our activity is beginning to be seen in the street and many youth and women have joined us. We wish to associate ourselves with the movement for global justice and build an Arab network.

Today, Syria and Iran are in imperialism's line of fire. Is it difficult in these conditions to criticize the Syrian regime?

The question today is not whether the Syrian regime is weakening or not in the face of imperialism, but knowing what is good for Syria, if Syria is capable of resisting imperialism. The current Syrian regime is incapable by its nature of resisting US imperialism, exactly as Saddam's regime was incapable.

On the contrary, the regime is even our greatest weakness in the anti-imperialist struggle. The absence of democratic liberties weakens terribly our capacity to respond. Thus when we criticize the regime, we work to build a stronger Syria. Today, without radical political change, all the potential of Syrian society is paralyzed in the face of imperialism. But so long as the people have not overcome their fear, we cannot build a real anti-imperialist resistance.

** The interview was carried out in August 2004 in Damascus by Latifa, Mireille Court, and Chris Den Hond.*