Rural Politics in Ba'thist Syria: A Case Study in the Role of the Countryside in the Political Development of Arab Societies

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The importance of the countryside *(rief)* for the social and economic development of Arab societies whose populations are still greatly peasant in composition and whose wealth is still based on agriculture seems incontestable. Less obvious, but equally important, is the *political* role of the peasantry and the rural areas in the process of transition from traditional to more modern types of social and political systems in the Middle East. There is plenty of evidence that political modernization cannot take place without a solution to the peasant problem—without their incorporation into the political system. Huntington holds that in modernizing countries where the bulk of the population is rural but where politics remains a predominately urban game, governments are likely to be ephemeral, unstable and ineffective. He argues that the establishment of stable and effective regimes requires bridging the urban-rural gap through some coalition of urban and rural forces which will bring the peasantry into the system. Furthermore, both Huntington and Barrington Moore argue that the particular type of leadership under which the peasants are brought into the political system greatly shapes the whole subsequent development of the system. The countryside, according to Huntington, plays a crucial swing role and this role varies from very conservative to very revolutionary. Three possibilities seem to be typical. One outcome is where peasants are brought into the system by upper-class leadership, sometimes through a formally liberal type electoral system, informally based on patronage and traditional symbolism, sometimes through a conservative authoritarian system. In this case, the peasantry tends to be a conservative force in the system, highly resistant to change. In the Middle East, this may be the case in Turkey, Morocco, Lebanon (until recently), and possibly Jordan. A second case is one where modernizing middle-class military officers have the acumen and skill to adopt modern political technology (such as party organiza-

tion and mass communications) to mobilize the peasants into the system from above, thus broadening their support base beyond army and bureaucracy. In this case, the peasants become part of the support base of a reforming regime. Egypt is the best example of this case in the Middle East, but efforts have been made to imitate her model in Libya, Sudan, Iraq (1958-68), and possibly Yemen. A third possibility is that radical intellectuals may link up with peasants and mobilize them from below and from the periphery as a force for the overthrow of the old regime. In this case, a single-party regime is normally established and a modernizing strategy of social transformation is carried out; the peasants become the support base of a revolution. No Middle Eastern cases greatly resemble this model, but Iraq under the Ba'th since 1968 and Democratic Yemen may come closest. Of course, some countries may represent hybrids of these three possible outcomes, and, as we will argue below, Syria may represent a mixture of the second and third models. The notion underlying the models is that there is a clear association between the type of urban-rural, elite-mass coalition of forces which establishes and sustains a political system (including the particular type of elite-peasant links and the depth and intensity of peasant participation), on the one hand, and, on the other, the type of political institutions which it is likely to assume and the kinds of modernizing strategies it is likely to pursue.[1]

In this study, an effort will be made to review the evidence as regards the case of Syria and the Ba'th party which rules her to see what relevance these models may have to it and what it may contribute to a theoretical understanding of the role of peasants in modernization. Syria has been a society largely based on the land. More than half of its labor force is engaged in agriculture. While agriculture directly accounted for 38 percent of the national revenue in the mid-fifties and only 22 percent by 1970, even in the latter year, agricultural products constituted 75-85 percent of exports and 34 percent of the value of internal trade.[2] Syria is industrializing, but most of her industries are still centered around agriculture—processing agricultural raw materials or producing

[1] For theoretical discussions of the role of the peasantry in social and political modernization, see Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, 1968), especially pp. 72-78; Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston, 1966); and Eric Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1969).

[2] Yehya Arudki, *al-Iqtisâd al-Sûriyya al-Hadîth* [The Modern Syrian Economy] (Damascus, 1972) pp. 213-29.

the requisites of agricultural production. Thus, Syria belongs to that class of societies in transition from traditional Agraria to a more modern industrialized type of society. In this transition, the problem of the peasants and the land became an acute issue of political conflict and out of this conflict (in part) issued the rise of a radical populist regime led by the Ba'th party which has significantly reshaped state and society over the last decade and a half.

Traditional Society and the Rise of the Ba'th: A Case of Rural Revolt

The rise of the Ba'th has to be put against a background of social change and contradiction in postindependence Syria. When Syria became independent her sociopolitical structure was what might best be called neofeudal or neopatrimonial; she was beginning to modernize, but the main lines of the traditional system remained intact; (1) the first historically important division of labor, namely, that between the preindustrial city and the countryside, remained dominant, and (2) society remained segmented into a plethora of "little communities" only weakly integrated with each other and with the center.[3]

In the city was the traditional elite of great families which held in its hands a monopoly of power, wealth and status. Members of the elite combined the role of politician with that of great landed magnate or wealthy merchant, comprador, or grain speculator. Below them was a traditional middle class of lesser merchants, shopkeepers, ulama, bureaucrats, professionals and artisans. At the bottom of urban society were the petty vendors, laborers, beggers and lumpenproletariat. The countryside was a world apart from the city. Here lived the majority of the population in some 5000 villages; there were a few prosperous rural notables, some independent owner-cultivators, but most of the peasants were landless tenants, sharecroppers or agricultural laborers. Nomadic pastoral society represented yet a third "world," a patriarchal tribal milieu which traditionally had contested with the city for control of the village.

This society shared the segmented mosaic structure characteristic of the Middle East, that is, the fragmentation of the

[3] For a theoretical discussion of patrimonialism and neofeudalism see Gideon Sjoberg, *The Pre-Industrial City* (New York, 1960); Marx's discussion of the division of labor in *The German Ideology* (New York, 1970); Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York, 1964) pp. 346-58.

population into relatively self-contained rival families, clans, tribes, villages and sects. The identifications and social existence of the individual were firmly rooted in and confined to these segments, most strongly in the patriarchal family, to an ever-declining degree in each of the successively larger social segments in which the former was embedded. Segmentalism was associated with a culture of "ardent particularism," endemic conflict between the units, and a feebleness of horizontal types of social cooperation. Vertical ties of tribe and patron clientage, although discontinuous and unstable, constituted the most effective social cement. At the level of the whole social system, segmentalism appeared as a great center-periphery cleavage. At the center, was the dominant Sunni Muslim landlord-merchant elite which controlled the state and much of the wealth of society. Ranged along the peripheries were a great variety of minority communities under their own patriarchal leaders. In the Latakia hills were Alouites, Ismailis and Christians; along the northern border, the Kurds, on the desert fringe, Ismailis, Circassians, Turkomans and the Bedouin; in the east, Kurds, Bedouin, and Assyrians; in the south, Druze, and in the southwest, Circassians. As the minority communities were predominately peasant, class and urban-rural cleavages overlapped, to some extent, with the center-periphery, communal divisions. As long as these communities remained socially unmobilized, society was mal-integrated and static.

This social structure rested on a predominately agrarian economic base, and the system of production relations by which the city extracted a surplus for its support from the peasantry. The credit and marketing operations of merchants and middlemen, big and small, were one such mechanism of extraction. The other was the system of landed property characterized by the separation between the ownership and the cultivation of land. There was a striking concentration of land in large estates and even many medium and small properties were owned by urban families or rural notables who did not personally cultivate them. Two-thirds, at least, of the peasants were landless. This system determined a highly unequal distribution of agricultural revenue. It also made peasants highly dependent on the great landlords; yet, if the literature is correct, it generated little community of interest or sentiment between lord and peasant.[4]

[4] See, e.g., Jacques Weulersse, *Paysans de Syrie et du Proche Orient* (Paris, 1946); and Doreen Warriner, *Land and Poverty in the Middle East* (New York, 1948).

The landlord contributed little to the production process that he had not already taken away from the peasant. The great gap between city and country was too wide a chasm for patron-clientage to effectively bridge for any sustained period. The socioeconomic consequences of the system were the poverty and misery of the peasantry and the agricultural backwardness and stagnation of the country.

Under these circumstances, the state remained the creature of the great notable politicians in the city, ruling by time-honored traditional methods. Control of the land gave control of the men on it and could also be translated into resources for patronage and into prestige. Peasants remained on the periphery of the political system, largely uninvolved and powerless. As long as they remained politically unmobilized, politics remained an urban game of competition for the spoils of office between small groups of notables and their followers. In such a milieu, the state remained fragile, narrowly based, and without the power to cope with the social crisis and national threat which Syria faced after independence.

In the fifties, the foundations of the traditional regime were seriously undermined. A spreading process of social mobilization began to dissolve the traditional social structure and to create new social forces which, ultimately, it would be unable to contain. Social mobilization was spurred by an economic expansion in industry and in commercial agriculture which Syria experienced in the early fifties; it was also associated with the growth of modern education and occupations. In some areas population pressure on the land was propelling people out of their traditional way of life. One consequence of social mobilization was to create in the mobilized a greater receptivity to horizontal types of social association and to a broadening of identities beyond an exclusive loyalty to the small segment to include class and nation. These social changes were probably a prerequisite to political mobilization. Another consequence of social mobilization was the creation of new classes, notably a new middle class, outside the traditional system of patronage and kin. An important stratum of this new class was drawn from the upper and middle peasantry, partly urbanized rural intellectuals, going into the two professions which happened to be open to them—teaching and the army.

By the middle fifties, latent contradictions between the traditional upper class and the new middle class had broken out in open political antagonism. There were several explanations for

this. The limits of the economic expansion had been reached and further development seemed to require major structural changes in society; the aspirations of the new middle class for careers, mobility and modernization appeared therefore to be in contradiction with the interests of the traditional elite. The grievances and bitterness generated by the Palestine disaster mixed with this social disaffection to create a powerful brew of revolutionary sentiment.

The problem of agricultural development and the peasantry was a central aspect of this crisis. Many believed that the primary responsibility for the limitations of Syria's development lay in the archaic neofeudal agrarian social structure and the great inequalities which kept the peasant majority of the population in backwardness. The military and political weakness of the state, as manifested in its miserable performance in the Palestine war, was also thought, in great part, to be a consequence of an outmoded political and social system which relegated the great mass of the population to the fringes of political life where they had no stake in the state or opportunity to serve it. Thus demands for reform and modernization of the agrarian structure and development of the village became increasingly widespread among the politicized moderns—especially those of rural origin. At the same time, unrest among the peasants themselves was growing due to a worsening of their objective conditions attributable to the growth of commercial agriculture, and to a spreading sense of relative deprivation. This ferment reflected the maturation of the social conditions for a middle-class-peasant political alliance against the old regime.

Throughout the fifties, the Ba'th party was the main political force trying to translate these social potentials into political mobilization. From the beginning, the party's main recruitment success was among rurals—in particular rural small-town and peasant youth who came to the city for education and were attracted by Ba'thist teachers. Aflaq and Bitar, the party founders, were themselves teachers and their first disciples, rural students. In the summer, the students returned to their villages to try to organize the peasants. The party also had a corps of doctors working in rural areas and lawyers defending peasant rights in the courts. The most important of the latter was Akram Hawrani who built a peasant base in Hama province strong enough to overturn the local landlords in the 1954 elections. In north and central Syria in the fifties the party was behind peasant demonstrations in

the cities and clashes with the landlord on the estates. By the late fifties, the Ba'th was taking on the proportions of a major political force.

This trend was cut short, however, by the creation of the United Arab Republic (UAR). Despite the party's crucial role in its creation, the UAR and the subsequent separatist period as well were, for the Ba'th, periods of demobilization. The party was dissolved and harassed by Nasir and its leaders split over how to deal with him and with the separatist regime. Conflict with Nasir cost the party a large part of its popular base, especially in the cities. Nasir's initiation of agrarian reform took some of the edge off rural discontent. So, when the Ba'th seized power in 1963 it was not through peasant votes or at the head of a peasant army, but through a *coup de' état* carried out by rural officers. This was to have profound consequences for the ability of the party to control the army. It should not, however, conceal the fact that the coup represented real social forces and was an outcome, albeit delayed, of the political mobilization of the fifties. The goal of its perpetrators was not just another coup, but a revolution in Syria. What had happened, it seems, is that Ba'th political organizing had created an educated, potential rural leadership, drawn from rural towns and villages, capable of expressing rural discontent—and located in two strategic professions, teaching and the army. Despite the organizational dissolution and fragmentation after 1958, local party nuclei in the towns and villages had persisted. When the coup took place, many of these rurals streamed into Damascus to take over positions in the government, army, and expanding party apparatus; others stayed in the provinces to build and expand local organizations. Over the subsequent years, the Ba'th process of entrenching itself meant closing the gap between center and periphery by a simultaneous reaching out from the center and building up from the bases.

The First Decade of Rule: Regime Consolidation and Development and the Role of the Village

Phase One, 1963-65. When the party came to power, it appeared as a relatively small coalition of officers and radical intellectuals. It controlled the heights of state power but its potential peasant base was demobilized and disorganized and its survival dependent on its hold over the army. Moreover, its claim to rule was challenged by strong rivals who were relatively well organ-

ized in the cities—Nasirites, the Sunni traditional establishment, liberals and even communists. The regime's main concern during this period was therefore to stay in power and extend its control.

A further liability was the fact that after the seizure of power an intraparty struggle broke out which pitted the first-generation party leaders, mostly of urban background, against a largely rural second generation, and in which the first espoused moderate and the second radical policies. Much of the dispute turned on the issue of how to treat the party's urban rivals and their demands; the older leaders preferred some accommodation with them, while the rurals, perhaps as a reflection of their alienation from the city, took a hard line. Eventually, the radicals won out and part of the explanation for this was their ability to flood the ranks of the reconstructing party organization with rurals—sometimes former members returning to the fold, sometimes their friends and relatives.

Out of these conflicts, a strategy did emerge to serve the twin goals of the dominant group in the regime—namely to stay in power and to carry out a social and political revolution. The strategy was three-pronged. First, a new set of political instruments would be forged to link the new center to its potential mass base. This was believed to lay in the countryside. The new leaders had an affinity with the *rief* by virtue of their social origins, much of their political experience had been gained in rural organization, they believed the peasants to be potentially revolutionary, and they knew that with them lay numbers. The new apparatus would be built by recruiting and training a pool of cadres or militants drawn from rural youth and from active elements of the peasantry, and linking them by ideology and organization to the new elite. Part of this pool was already available as a result of roots put down in the villages during the fifties. Second, this new apparatus would be used to mobilize a large peasant base. Third, it would be used to carry out a social transformation aimed at destroying the neofeudal and commercial-capitalist-type production relations, redistributing control of resources, and creating new types of "socialist" relationships. In the countryside the principal slogan symbolizing this program was "The Land to Him Who Works It." In practice, these goals translated into land and tenure reform, rural political organization, and the creation of state and cooperative forms of agricultural infrastructure. In the aggregate these changes would, it was believed, gradually narrow the scope of capitalist and neofeudal types of relations and con-

stitute a new rural social order. Through these programs the leaders also thought they could forge a shared interest between themselves and the peasants, and therefore, that they would also serve as levers of political mobilization. This strategy was expected to build a mass base of support for the party, while narrowing the scope of support for rivals and breaking mass ties to them; in this way the party's hold on the center could be legitimized and urban hostility contained. Given the circumstances in which the party found itself, this was a realistic strategy, but it did have one clear Achilles' heel. Although the party did not entirely neglect the urban population and in particular made not unsuccessful efforts among the modest working class, in general, its support base in the cities remained modest. And this thirty percent of the population had the skills and money that the peasants lacked.

Phase Two, 1965-70. During this period substantial progress was made in implementing the party's strategy, but not without payment of a price. The land reform began in earnest; whereas previously the older leaders had resisted it for fear of making further enemies, the radicals thought it would make more friends than enemies. In this period the party and peasant union organizations began to take on real dimensions. As a result of these initiatives, overt social struggle increased in the countryside. In the cities, the regime presided over an atmosphere of austere egalitarian leveling and repression and over a growing ruralization as peasants streamed into the cities to make their claims on the spoils of the revolution. During this period the first efforts, though ultimately unsuccessful, to train and mobilize peasants as part of a popular war of liberation against Israel were made. And the basic commitment was made to build the Euphrates Dam, the key to rural modernization in Syria.

But the costs of implementing this strategy were high. The most immediate cost was that it led to an intensifying intraparty struggle which was only resolved in 1966 when the moderates were ousted from the party—taking with them the loyalties of a significant minority of its membership. The ousting of the elder leaders and the party's increasingly rural and leftist caste only further alienated much of the urban population, and while the rural influx into the cities might ultimately shift the balance of sentiment there in the party's favor, a regime committed to modernization pays a high price if it alienates the holders of modern skills and means. Both capital and skills tended to leave the country. In the countryside, landlords often ceased to invest or provide credit,

but the regime was still only in the process of forging a substitute infrastructure to provide production requisites; the result was agrarian instability and stagnation for most of the late sixties. The most disastrous result of the radical trend, however, was the 1967 war. This catastrophe was of such a magnitude that it soon precipitated another split in the party over strategies to cope with its consequences. One trend wanted to continue the radical course and even deepen it. The other wanted to suspend the social struggle and abandon further radical reforms in order to forge national unity behind preparations for war. This meant seeking a *détente* with the urban upper classes and opposition and wooing conservative Arab oil money needed to rebuild the army. The implications for the rural areas of these opposing strategies can be seen in differing attitudes toward land reform and private investment in agriculture. The radicals wanted another wave of land reform to break the power of medium landowners over the peasants and were willing to pay the cost in further agrarian instability. The newly emergent moderate trend opposed such a measure; earlier reforms were not even completed yet or agriculture reorganized. It is tempting to suppose that a reform aimed close to interests of the rural petty bourgeoisie would also be opposed on the grounds that it was striking too near to the regime's own support base and even at a sector from which part of the elite itself was drawn. As it turned out, when the moderate trend finally won out it actually made some minor adjustments in the previous land reform laws which returned some expropriated lands to their former owners. As regards private investment, the radicals preferred to let large tracts of land seized in the Jezira lay uncultivated since the state lacked the means to do so rather than rent them out to investors—for fear of the social consequences. The opposite trend took a more liberal attitude toward investment and subsequently did rent these lands out, a move justified in terms of raising production to finance the war effort.

Phase Three, 1970-Present. The victory of the moderate trend in late 1970 under the leadership of General Hafiz al-Asad marked the ascendancy of the military over the radical intellectuals in the Ba'th's ruling group. It also marked an alteration in the regime's strategy toward the rural areas. On the one hand, the program of peasant organization continued as before and the new social infrastructure continued to be laid in place. This effort was buttressed by the creation of the National Progressive Front through which the smaller progressive opposition parties were co-opted by

the regime, bringing into the system the smaller peasant followings they had been able to preserve. On the other hand, a liberalization took place in agrarian policy which has encouraged larger private landowners and merchants to invest in agriculture and given them a sense of security lacking heretofore for fear of a third land reform. This policy, whatever its intention, may well mean the effective abandonment of the drive to make the "socialist," that is, state and cooperative sectors, the clearly dominant social forces in the countryside, and a willingness to accept a dual structure including a large scope for capitalist-type social relationships. Whatever the possible contradictions in this new policy, the accommodation of the regime with the largely urban progressive opposition and with the upper and upper-middle classes meant that it had at least partly broken out of its relative isolation in the cities and was forging a broader coalition of both urban and rural forces. Nevertheless the persistence of substantial urban-centered opposition to the Ba'th suggests that the regime's essential rural roots remain critical to its survival.

The Durable Structural Consequences of a Decade of Ba'th Rule

The durable consequences of a decade of Ba'th rule can be surveyed under three headings: elite change, institutional innovation, and social change.

Elite Change. As a result of the Ba'th revolution, the traditional urban upper class which heretofore dominated politics has been politically ruined and in its place now stands a wholly new rural elite. This change in elite appears to be much more thorough than was true of other revolutions in the Middle East, for example, Egypt where the new military rulers had connections with and continued to rely on politicians and bureaucrats with roots in the older elite.

The new elite represents the second generation of Ba'thists, that is, the rural students recruited during the fifties. One striking characteristic of the elite is therefore its youthfulness; the rulers of Syria are in their thirties and forties. A second characteristic is their rural social origins. They are drawn from the provincial small-town lower-middle class and from the peasantry. According to Van Dusen, they come from the lowest social stratum able to provide a high school education for its sons—the minimum req-

uisite for a political career.[5] During the 1950's about 5-10 percent of the male population was getting exposure to such an education. This does appear to represent a widening of the recruitment pool beyond the small group of great families which previously constituted it, but it is clear that those peasant sons getting education represented a very small proportion of the peasantry. To the extent only more well-to-do peasant families could afford to send their sons for education or could spare them from the fields, one would expect the peasant component in the elite to be drawn from the upper stratum of the peasantry. However, this tendency was mitigated by the fact that high population density in some areas and the intense desire of peasant youth from the minority communities for education to overcome their low status in Sunni society were both strong forces drawing to education peasant youth who were not necessarily of the top stratum. In addition, the party sometimes set up its own free schools in the villages. Since the entrenchment of the regime, formal party recruitment channels have extended into most villages and access to high school education has widened to include about one-fourth of the male population.[6] This seems to represent a further broadening of the recruitment pool and a stabilization of the new elite type. Recruitment no longer is based on family name, great wealth, and Ottoman or European university education as it was under the old regime; today high school or Syrian university education and party or military service appear to be the important factors explaining recruitment. The one carry-over which seems to persist, though possibly to a more limited extent, is the use of personal and primordial types of connections in climbing the ladder of power.

A final notable characteristic of the elite is the disproportionate representation in it of the previously deprived peripheral minority groups. The party's secular and radical ideology appears to have had a special affinity for them; both it and the army offered chances for upward mobility for those of low socioeconomic status in a relatively closed society. Despite this proportional imbalance, however, the majority community is well represented in absolute terms. As such, the new elite can probably be said to

[5] Michael H. Van Dusen, "Syria: Downfall of a Traditional Elite," in *Political Elites and Political Modernization in the Middle East,* ed. Frank Tachau (Cambridge, Mass., 1975) p. 139.

[6] Statistics on education rely on discussion in "Development Planning and Social Objectives in Syria," *United Nations Studies on Selected Development Problems in Various Countries in the Middle East, 1971* (New York, 1971), pp. 8-16.

cross-cut sectarian cleavages, representing a new core for the state formed on a relatively secular basis. The adhesion of the peripheral communities to the center, despite the persistence of sectarian tensions, probably contributes to the long-run integration of the political community.

In general, it seems arguable that elite recruitment is probably reaching further down in the stratification system and further into the periphery in Syria than in most other Arab or Third World countries.

Institutional Innovation. A second change worth stressing has been the creation of new kinds of political infrastructure using new political technology and designed to bridge the urban-rural, elite-mass and segmental cleavages characteristic of traditional society. The regime realized that peasant mobilization and social change were goals of a type which could not very well be imposed by bureaucracy from above, or spread with the help of local traditional influentials from below. A new type of infrastructure combining strong leadership from the center, a new kind of local activist, and broad peasant participation seemed called for—in short, a Leninist sort of model. The regime has tried to adopt a modified version of this model and the outcome of its efforts does appear to have a family resemblance to it.

There is now an elaborate organizational apparatus in place, run on something like democratic-centralist lines and stretching from center to village. It has been built by recruitment from two groups: first, educated village youth attracted by ideology and the possibility of mobility and political careers or local power, and second, small-holding peasants, attracted by land, ideology, and the benefits of cooperatization and state aid. The strategy behind this recruitment does not seem to be a bad one; it is a kind of investment in the future through youth, and a tapping of numbers, represented by the peasantry.

The center of the system is the party which has a network of about 100,000 activists. It seems to perform four functions in the *rief.* It is a recruitment infrastructure, giving rurals access to a ladder of mobility. It provides a channel of elite-mass communication, potentially two-way. It is an apparatus for rural policy implementation; through a specialized party Peasant Bureau, party leaders supervise the state agrarian apparatus and organize and control the cooperatives and peasant unions. Finally, in the villages, it constitutes a center of local leadership.

The main party auxiliary is the General Federation of

Peasants. This organization has been built by recruiting and training a nucleus of peasant cadres in federation schools who are then returned to the village to organize. The Federation has an organizational infrastructure connecting center and base and by the 1970's appeared to have about 40 percent of the eligible peasants organized into about 3000 village unions. The Federation has three general functions. First, it is an instrument for carrying out the regime's rural policy. It has played useful roles in land reform, in preparing peasants for cooperatization, in watching and assisting in the performance of state-directed credit and marketing operations, and in spreading literacy and agricultural education. Second, it is supposed to represent peasant interests in the system, and seems, to some extent, to be a channel for the upward flow of peasant voice—at least its resolutions appear to reflect peasant expectations. It mediates relations between individual peasants and the bureaucracy, and acts as a peasant spokesman in the agrarian courts and in enforcing the agrarian relations law. Its representatives sit in party and government bodies which make decisions on rural policy. Third, at the village level, the unions are arenas for peasant participation and self-management in such things as conflict resolution and village development.

This system does seem to represent a new form of elite-mass linkage, genuinely different from previous types. Characteristics of patron-clientism can be discerned behind the formal structures, but the system differs from patron-client networks in its modern organization, orientation to developmental goals, and in the lack of great asymmetries between the personal resources of leaders and followers. The system has traits of a conventional bureaucracy, but differs from one in being a voluntary organization drawn from local communities, not simply a hierarchy of appointed officials, and in its arrangements for an upward flow of opinion and some scope for elections from below. On balance, while these infrastructures do contribute to the ability of the regime to control peasants for its own purposes, they also appear to have played a real role in peasant politicization and in the stimulation of peasants to participation.[7]

Social Change: Strategies for Rural Modernization. The regime has tried to use its new political instruments to change the

[7] Analysis and data regarding the new political institutions in the *rief* rely on fieldwork done in Syria, including some at the village level, 1973-4.

socioeconomic configuration in the countryside. Ideally, and in the long term, the regime has claimed to be aiming at a socialist transformation and agrarian revolution in the *rief.* In more immediate and manageable terms, these notions have translated into efforts to alter the stratification system by leveling the neofeudal structure and bolstering the position of the peasantry, thus reducing the great class gaps of traditional society. One can also discern a drive to alter the feudal segmental structure of the old society, replacing patron-clientism, tribalism, localism and sectarianism with broader identifications and more modern types of relations; these efforts to curb the centrifugal effects of segmentalism aim at the creation of a more integrated state and society. Finally, there have been attempts to remove obstacles to and spur economic modernization and growth. Three institutional pillars support this general effort.

1. Reform of Land Tenure and Distribution. Reform has involved the breakup of the great estates and the creation of a relatively broad stratum of small proprietor-cultivators. About 20 percent of the cultivated surface has been transferred to peasant beneficiaries and another 20 percent to state control. (This includes the transfer of state land, previously controlled largely by big landlords.) By way of comparison, the Egyptian reforms appear to have transferred about 13 percent of the surface to peasants. Big property has been reduced from 50 percent of the land surface to somewhat more than 10 percent, while the proportion held by small-holders had increased from 15-25 percent to about 35-50 percent. The proportion of landless peasants has decreased from 65-70 percent to about 30-40 percent. There has also been a reform of the conditions of tenure effected through an agrarian relations law which gives the peasant an increased share of the product and virtual security of tenure. These two changes appear to mean a considerable redistribution of resources in the *rief,* and there is evidence of rises in peasant income as a result.[8]

2. The Cooperative Movement. The role of the cooperative movement is (1) to act as a framework for receipt and organization of credit and production supplies and of marketing. This aims to cut out and replace the middlemen and landlords who previously took most of the product and to break peasant dependency on them. (2) The cooperatives are also designed to

[8] These figures are derived from officially published materials on the agrarian reform and on the recent agricultural census. They should obviously be taken as mere "guesstimates."

act as units for the stimulation and organization of community development among peasants, particularly collective investment in larger-scale means of production or development projects beyond the capacity of individuals.

The success of the cooperatives is mixed. They seem to function well enough in the supply of production requisites and credit, but less so in marketing where middlemen do persist. Whether it should be taken as a sign of success or failure, productivity levels are comparable to those in the private sector. Development performance—getting peasants to save and collectively invest—has been modest. But the biggest limitation of the movement is the fact that by the early 1970's less than one-third of the eligible peasants were cooperatized. Reasons for the modest performance of the movement may be found in certain weaknesses at the base—in lack of cooperative spirit among peasants as manifested in family and clan rivalries and corrupt practices, and in weaknesses from above, in the inability of the regime to supply quality support personnel as manifested in accounting deficiencies and the lack of proper administrative supervision and technical assistance.

The main social base of the cooperative system appears to be the middle peasantry—small-holders—but there is some evidence that rich peasants who hire labor are not necessarily excluded. There is some evidence that more well-to-do peasants sometimes dominate the cooperatives, but it is hard to know whether this represents an active class contradiction inside the cooperative movement.

3. The State Agricultural Sector. The regime has made an effort to create a new state agricultural sector to "lead" the cooperative and private sectors, that is, to increase the state's ability to control agriculture, extract resources, plan, supply the villages, and encourage development. The state markets the main crops, reserving for itself the profits which previously enriched landlords and merchants. But more than the latter, the new state reinvests at least a part of these resources in social and economic development in the *rief*. It has established a system of state farms. There are a series of ministries for the provision of agricultural and social services. A significant innovation is the creation of a new set of ministries and agencies engaged in land reclamation, water resource development and model community development in places such as the Ghab and Euphrates Basin. There has also been a significant development of agricultural oriented industries

to supply production requisites (tractors, fertilizer, etc.) and to process the product. A central key to this modernization drive is the Euphrates Dam project which holds the potential to transform Syrian agriculture by creating a large modern agro-industrial base. In contrast to previous regimes, under the Ba'th the state is again assuming the active role in the control and development of agriculture which, if history is any guide, is necessary for Syria's fragile agrarian base to yield its potential prosperity. Nevertheless its efforts continue to be marred by shortage of skills and capital, and organizational and managerial weaknesses.

What have been some of the durable social structural consequences as well as the long-term impact on economic development of all these social and political changes initiated by the regime? The most salient change in social structure seems to be the destruction of neofeudalism. Land reform has eliminated its economic base by transforming a situation of extreme oligopoly to one much more nearly resembling an economy of free competition between small producers. The cooperative movement, agrarian relations laws, and state service infrastructure have curbed the ability of landlords and merchants to keep peasants dependent and cut out much of the base for classic patron-clientism, while the peasant union has organized small peasants into a bloc politically opposed to traditional leadership. The redistribution of resources to the peasants and the increase in opportunities for political and other kinds of upward mobility appear to have created a more open social structure and to have partly broken down the castelike urban-rural gaps which previously obtained. The erosion of the wealth and power of local, tribal, and sectarian leaders and the strengthening of the state center through integration of peasants to it by the cooperatives, peasant union, party and state apparatus have probably undermined the social base for neofeudalistic segmentalism and led to a new level of social integration in Syria.

This hardly measures up to the standards of a "socialist transformation," or even to the full implementation of the slogan, "The Land to Him Who Works It." Landholding is still quite unequal—landlords retain more than five times the surface of typical peasants. Urban and rural bourgeoisies which own land but do not work it remain strong, and middlemen are still active and important. More than one-third of the peasant population is landless. In general, alongside the cooperative and state sectors—and even overlapping with them—is a large private sector.

Capitalist relations of tenancy, employment, investment, and exchange are pervasive; what has emerged is a decidedly *mixed* rural structure; a blend of state, cooperative, private small-producing and medium-sized agrarian capitalist sectors.

Economically, the performance of the regime seems mixed as well. The agrarian slowdown of the late fifties carried over into the sixties and the structural changes and social conflict initiated by the Ba'th at first aggravated this trend. However, by the early seventies, the aggregate impact of reforms, state investment and development projects, political and social stabilization, the progressive implantation of a new agrarian infrastructure, and the liberalization of the climate for private investment all seemed to be creating the conditions for a new expansion in Syrian agriculture. While still inconclusive, production statistics do support the existence of such a trend.[9] The gradual completion of the Euphrates Dam project should buttress and accelerate it over the next couple of decades. Prospects for economic growth appear to be fairly good.

Conclusions

A few suggestions may be offered by way of conclusion. Huntington held that the key to the creation of a strong state was the incorporation of the rural masses into politics. It does seem that one of the striking developments in Syrian politics has been the emergence of a strong party-state in the last decade, relatively stable and effective, at least by comparison with the regimes of the forties and fifties. It seems arguable that part of the explanation for this lies in the fact that while the latter regimes rested on narrow social bases, having failed to mobilize the countryside, the present regime has created a broader base by doing so. Its rural origins, new political infrastruction and social innovations reducing great urban-rural and class gaps and curbing the effects of segmentalism have all contributed to the integration of state and society. Property is a means of social control; its wider distribution as a result of social reforms and the creation of a more gradiated stratification system probably gives more people a greater stake in the system. The parallel to Iraq, also characterized by narrow-based unstable regimes until the Ba'th takeover, may be instructive.

[9] See *UN Statistical Yearbook 1975* (New York, 1976), e.g., indices of agricultural production, p. 111.

It was previously suggested that where radical intellectuals mobilized the peasantry, a revolutionary one-party state was likely to result, and that where officers were able to link up from above with the peasants, a reformist military regime was a typical outcome. The Ba'th seems to be a mix of these two options—a symbiotic overlap of military politicians and radical intellectuals based on the single party. If the proposition is accepted that peasant mobilization by intellectuals leads to a one-party revolutionary regime, it seems to follow that the deeper and more intense is peasant mobilization from below, the stronger will be the single party and the greater the power of the radical intellectuals. Where the revolutionary regime comes to power at the head of a huge armed peasant movement as in China, it should be very strong indeed. In the case of the Ba'th, peasant mobilization was much more sporadic, there were intervening periods of demobilization and fragmentation of the peasant base, and mobilization from below was interwoven with a more bureaucratized type of mobilization from above. Obviously, the Ba'th party has been far less powerful and far less revolutionary than the Communist party in China, and part of the explanation for these kinds of differences may lay in differential mobilizational performance: enough power was mobilized to establish a new elite and a mixed military-party state, but ultimately radical intellectuals proved unable to mobilize enough peasant power—enough numbers intensely enough—to subordinate the gun to their revolutionary goals.

It was suggested that a revolutionary transforming type of modernizing strategy is associated with intense peasant mobilization by radical intellectuals through a single party and reforming-type strategies with a military regime. Wherever the line between reform and revolution may be drawn, it is clear that the Ba'th's strategies of rural mobilization have fallen short of revolutionary socialist transformation. Part of the explanation for this may be its more modest level of peasant mobilization as compared to other revolutionary experiences. On the other hand, the Ba'th's sort of mixed strategy of modernization—somewhere between reform and revolution—appears quite compatible with the support base that it has mobilized—namely a coalition of radical intellectuals, army officers and small bureaucrats drawn from the rural petty bourgeoisie and mainstream peasantry, in alliance with the middle peasantry in the cooperatives and peasant unions—to which the liberalization has added elements of the urban population,

possibly including the agrarian bourgeoisie. Its strategy has not been a pure capitalist or Stalinist one—both of which tend to make the peasants pay the heaviest price of modernization—and that seems understandable. Nor has it been of the Chinese type, which, being based on the poor peasantry, aims to create a homogeneous peasant class by eradicating private property and tries to modernize the countryside without exploiting it for the sake of the cities. The Ba'th's strategy has been mixed. Under the radicals it tried to bolster the middle and poor peasantry as a base of organized power with which to undermine the leadership of both great landlords and the tradition-oriented bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie; under the moderates it has preserved the middle-peasant base, perhaps giving up on the poor peasants, while trying to accommodate the rural petty bourgeoisie and the agrarian big bourgeoisie. It would probably be fair to say that the center of gravity of the Ba'th regime lies essentially in the petty bourgeoisie. Such a mixed strategy, which wavers between capitalism and socialism, the bourgeoisie and the lower classes, is often said to be characteristic of petty bourgeois regimes. A mixed strategy is likely to mix costs and benefits: it may have the advantage of flexibility, of providing a variety of options which, as conditions warrant, can be emphasized or deemphasized; but it may also have certain built-in contradictions: Can a cooperative and state socialist sector really be made to work in a milieu where capitalist investment relations remain pervasive? Might there not be fundamental contradictions between the interests of big investors and small peasants, laborers and those who hire labor?

Finally, what may be the relevance of the other possible models to the future of Syrian political development? What prospects are there for movement toward a liberal model? The failure of the traditional landlords and bourgeoisie to make a success of this model by effectively linking up with peasants opened the door for the Ba'th to mobilize the peasants and subsequently to reduce much of the social power of the landlords, particularly their regional bases in land and patronage. This may, for a time, have foreclosed on the liberal option in Syria; it certainly undermined the social basis for the kind of traditional pluralism characteristic of the heretofore most durable liberal regime in the Arab world, namely Lebanon. If we recall that it was the failure of Ataturk's single party to mobilize the peasantry and the consequent ability of an alternative landed elite to bring them in which preserved the social base for a competitive party system in

Turkey, we may be further convinced that the Ba'th, by destroying much landlord power and organizing the peasants in a single-party system, has reduced the immediate chances for liberalism in Syria.

Is a move to the authoritarian right likely? This cannot be ruled out but it would seem to require a big change in the social base of the elite and the amalgamation of the present political elite with the older landed upper classes, that is, a much greater ability to translate power into wealth and wealth into power than presently seems to exist. A large inflow of oil capital might provide favorable conditions, yet it would seem to be very difficult and costly in terms of social conflict to reverse the reforms of the last decade so as to open up much scope for the large-scale agrarian capitalism which may provide the social base of conservative authoritarianism in transitional countries. Large-scale investment also presupposes an acceptable solution to the problem of Israel and Palestine—a very problematical prospect indeed.

How about a move in the direction of radicalization? Further radicalization would appear to be in the interest of the lower portion of the peasantry lacking land, but this force is not well mobilized and by itself remains peripheral—unless the regime's middle-peasant base should become alienated and link up with the poorer peasants. However the present integration of a relatively large middle-peasant sector into a social and political structure which still sanctions a role for private property and capitalist investment relations probably significantly undermines the chances for a more thorough socialist revolution. A failure of liberalization and oil-money inflow to provide sufficient capital or a disintegration of the regime's coalition over an unsatisfactory peace settlement—or lack of settlement—could provide favorable conditions for this option. However, both theory and the evidence lead one to think that no great change in any direction from the present type of system is likely: regime type, policies, and social base in Syria seem to have reached, for the moment, at least, a point of rather stable compatibility.