



Arab Reform Brief

55 February
2012

Arab Reform Briefs are Monthly analysis and insights from engaged Arab scholars or activists dealing with all key reform issues in the social, economic, political and legal domains.

The “Silent Bloc”.. Acquiescing to Tyranny Willingly or Out of Fear

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Three months after the onset of the Syrian revolution, Arab intellectual Burhan Ghalioun said in response to a question about the silent majority, “I believe that there actually is a significant, not-so-small group of Syrians who remain silent. One of the main reasons for their silence is their concern for stability. Here, we are speaking of businessmen, professionals, manufacturers, and economists. The livelihoods of these people require stability, and they believe that the Assad regime secures this stability.” Syrian journalist Ghassan Al-Imam defines the latter as “a passive, conservative group bound by its traditions, by church on Sundays and the mosque on Fridays. It is financially comfortable and its main concern is the preservation of security and stability.” Yemeni activist Khaled Mukrad Al-Muqattari says, “in order to stoke up the revolution, we need to mobilise the silent blocs and define the revolution not as a crisis between the opposition Joint Meeting Parties and the central authorities, but as a revolution aimed at uprooting corruption, i.e., the people’s revolution.”

This statement does not entirely reflect the situation on the ground in Syria; in Yemen, there was always a relative room for

manoeuvre, for over and above being openly present on the public scene and in the media, the opposition had its own representatives in

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parliament. Moreover, there was no palpable fear among the Yemeni people, meaning that what we had there was a silent group waiting to see who comes on top from among this political class towards which, based on experience and according to Al-Muqattari's above statement, it feels no sense of belonging. Bahraini activist Hassan Madan wonders, "Is the activists' discourse still unable to garner some of these groups' support, or is it that they themselves find nothing attractive in this coloured discourse, whether it falls under the umbrella of political Islam or secular ideologies? Do these silent groups feel that

these two discourses do not reflect their hopes and aspirations for the country, or are they fearful of the future, still under the spell of the bitter memories of the not-so-distant past? If so, this means that one of the ways of compelling them to be more positive is to speed-up and deepen the reforms, whereby the greater their impact on the ground the more these groups will trust our resolve to make change happen."

In fact, the Egyptian revolution had its own silent bloc, known as the "Sofa Party"

because its members sat quietly at home watching events unfold. It is also true,

however, that the short span of the Egyptian revolution made any talk about this group rather moot; this is especially true given the fact that the clear majority of seats that the Islamist parties won in the parliamentary elections were largely due to Sofa Party members; therefore, this group's issue remains the elections. A young blogger wrote about it prior to the elections in Egypt saying, "These are the silent bloc, they do not necessarily have a single firm position either for or against the revolution, or for or against the Islamists or the liberals. What they want is a better Egypt for themselves and their children; they have its welfare at heart even if they disparage it sometimes. These are unequivocally eligible citizens with full rights." The issue was raised as to how this bloc could be persuaded to take part in the

elections and what role could different political forces play in this respect. Tunisia went through a similar experience prior to the elections that eventually brought the Islamist Al-Nahda Party to power.

The conclusion I wanted to reach by quoting the above statements by a number of activists from countries that witnessed revolutions, uprising and protests is that in reality there is no silent majority problem, in the manner it was raised, except in Syria. Twelve months into the revolution, most of the slogans and

calls, albeit with certain exceptions here and there, still revolve around the issues of freedom, dignity, democracy, the civil state, unity among the people and rejection of sectarianism and violence, which is why the majority of Syrian leftists and secular personalities and groups are behind the revolution. We believe, in fact, that the high cost involved in taking part in the revolution, the killings, arrests and disruption of one's income, is at the root of all the factors we rely on to explain certain aspects of the problem in Syria. Silence out of fear of the regime is far greater than the fear of what the future might hold.

The "silent bloc" in Syria, is it the right term to use?

Fear of repression is a human characteristic, and fear of the future that results from it and compels certain segments of the population to retreat into their shells, is a characteristic particular to each, and every, Arab tyranny. In Syria, the revolution succeeded in dispelling this fear by dislodging it from under its multi-layered shell after breaking it apart, when once it tended not to interfere either in the public political or private national spheres. I believe there is a distorted reality in Syria fostered, on the one hand, by the regime, its media and some of our intellectuals and, on the other, by the international media that supports either the regime or the revolution, albeit within the confines of non-intervention by the international community. The latter's excuse is the presence of a silent bloc, an erroneously called silent bloc.

We could have spoken about a silent bloc in the first few months of the revolution, well before this unprecedented violence that cost so far the lives of 6500 martyrs, and left tens of thousands either detained, injured or maimed, let alone the siege and dismemberment of cities by the shabbiha (regime's thugs), intelligence services and the army, who use unspeakable methods to suppress the revolution. To speak about a silent majority today is only to serve the regime's campaign of repression against the revolution, a diversion from any objective analysis of the revolution and its constituent elements, and a convenient camouflage for the regime's supporters.

Today, and less than a year after the onset of the revolution, we could experimentally call this bloc "the group that does not act in tandem with the revolution", and I will support my assumption with the following:

One of these groups has quite an effective presence on the scene and views the Sunni majority with caution; it comprises large segments of the religious minorities, and it is cautious because:

1. The general climate fostered by the war on terror in the wake of September 11,

2001, and the concomitant spread of an anti-Islamic culture, in general, a common phenomenon among most minorities in the Middle East, regardless of the objectivity, or lack of, of what we could call the fallout from the so-called "Islamophobia" in the West. However, those at the receiving end of this culture did not work hard enough to counter it, since their interest lay in preserving this enmity due to the intersection of their interests with those of the regime. This group, which failed to act, did not do so solely out of fear; for now that almost a year has passed since the daily killings have begun, we fear that it has willingly chosen to be on the side of tyranny. This is why it should not be defined as a "silent bloc," because it actually did and does act, since it has on several occasions constituted, and still does, the larger part of that segment of the population

that goes down to the street to celebrate and cheer for the regime.

2. The culture of fear that the regime has entrenched among part of the Alawite community, under the pretext that the regime in power is their own and it is therefore incumbent on them to protect and defend it against the Sunnis. This phenomenon is directly tied to the privileged status they enjoyed in the army, security forces and state institutions, which created a convergence of interests and a close link between a small segment of this community and the regime's survival, against this culture's backdrop. This bloc is not silent, either, regardless of class or any other consideration, which, as we said before, was only valid at the very beginning. We will continue to cautiously use the term "silent group", until a more apt term could be found to describe it.

Some have a tendency to view the revolution as having an Islamist character, which encourages other sectors of the population to shy away from joining the protest movement. To respond to this assumption, I will review the levels of protest and demonstrations in different Governorates, based on their population size (percentage of their respective total populations):

1. Aleppo Governorate, 22.64%; protesters took to the streets in certain parts of the city, and students at Aleppo University took part in the demonstrations from the very beginning; twelve of its citizens were killed on January 27, 2012, "the Friday of Self-Defence." Some of its public markets (souks) joined the general strike as did most of the Arab and Kurdish population in the rural areas, despite efforts by the Kurdistan Workers' Party to quell them in areas under its control, like 'Ifrin and Aleppo's Kurdish quarters, including sheikh Maqsoud, al-Ashrafieh and Al-Siryani Al-Qadeem, in full view of the Syrian regime and with its support. The relative calm of Aleppo could be attributed to a number of factors, the most important among which are:

- The role that Turkey plays thanks to its close relationship with the city's merchant class and some of its activities. At this stage of the revolution, and for complicated economic and geopolitical reasons, the Turks might prefer that Aleppo stay quiet for the time being.

- Aleppo's religious leaders, who are appointed by the regime, have been co-opted and forced to tow the line since the 1980s. The regime's experience in Aleppo at that time, and its struggle against the Muslim Brotherhood in the city, forced it to reconfigure Aleppo's religious leaderships by encouraging turbaned officials to assume control of the religious and proselytising fields.

- The complex ethnic and religious make up of the Governorate, which symbolic and business leaders have common interests and maintain clientele relationships with the regime. These leaders are not silent in order to preserve stability, but to ensure the regime's survival.

- Over and above the security clampdown, a highly suppressive shabbiha-led security system has been set up in the city by a group of self-proclaimed tribal leaders and smugglers. These are financed voluntarily by a number of businessmen to protect their interests with the regime, or out of fear of its vengeful reprisal, and the regime supplies them with weapons.

- The city's merchant class relies on the internal Syrian market, in general, and on Aleppo's market in particular. The latter, many of whom are driven by self-interest, have entered into bona fide partnerships with the regime's cronies and members of its inner circles. Their stance is opportunistic in general.

- The high level of fear that grips the city as a result of the highly repressive tactics used by the regime in the 1980s, tactics that still cast a long shadow. Aleppo has paid dearly for these events in the decades that followed, whether in terms of political marginalisation or poor public services.

- As far as I know, Aleppo's opposition movements, such as the Socialist Union Party, did not call for demonstrations. Just like in other cities, Aleppo's leftist movements are very weak and their leaders, who have been co-opted by the regime, have succeeded in alienating the elite from the street.

- Furthermore, although Aleppo's situation has shown that Sunni Islam in Syria does not share a common religious reference of a representative nature, Sunni Islam does not have, nor will it have, a single unified political representation. It is worth noting here the strong influence of the so-called Aleppo current within the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood Movement, thanks to its effective presence among the ranks of the opposition, especially within the Syrian National Council of which it is considered one of the founders.

2. The Damascus Countryside Governorate (12.82%); the city's entire countryside has risen save for Al-Nabk, Sednaya and Deyr Atiya.

3. Damascus Governorate (8.6%); the areas of Maidan and Rukn-Eddin have been going out into the streets in protest since the first days of the revolution, and are still doing so; nevertheless, there is still a scared group of citizens and another that colludes with the regime. Some religious figures, like Mohammad Said Ramadan Al-Bouti and others, maintain close ties with the city's nouveau-riche elements and some traditional merchants whose commercial interests coincide on many levels with those of the regime. Certain segments of the Governorate's population, tied in complex ways to the system's mechanisms and institutions, form a solid constituency for the regime. On the other hand, it is important to note the stance adopted by the city and its countryside, in particular Douma, Harasta, Saqba, 'Irbeen, Jobar, Kfar Batna, Ma'raba, Al-Tal, Maneen, Barza, al-Qaboon and Qatana, whose residents never stopped protesting and demonstrating. Moreover, a large segment of Damascus' residents have

sold their homes to take advantage of the extremely high real estate prices, brought about by speculation on the real estate market by members of the regime's inner circles, and many of them moved to the city suburbs.

4. The revolution's capital Homs and its Governorate (8.49%); the entire Governorate rose up except for a few rural areas due to their particular religious make up and the terror tactics employed by the regime. Some in this Governorate believe that the regime is the only protectors of minorities although they, like everyone else, suffer from a lack of freedom and the endemic corruption in the country. It is worth mentioning that Homs' revolution has brought to the forefront activists from all religions and creeds who express their full trust in the revolution, and the need for solidarity among different elements of the Syrian population.

5. Hama Governorate (7.68%); the majority of this Governorate's population rose up as well except for a few rural areas.

6. Al-Hasaka Governorate (7.1%); most of this Governorate's cities and towns rose up, including Christians and Muslims, Arabs, Kurds and Assyrians. The heightened sense of citizenship among this Governorate's popular mosaic prevented the regime, with all its might, methods and men, from breaching the solidarity among the citizens. The same happened when the Kurdistan Workers' Party attempted to foment dissent among them by aggressively stoking up Kurdish nationalist sentiments against their fellow citizens in Al-Hasaka. However, despite the regime's support for the establishment of the so-called Kurdish Parliament, whose members are appointed by the Turkish leadership of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, in order to weaken solidarity among the Kurds, the plan failed in Al-Jazira. It had a relative success in areas in which it was present earlier, like 'Ifreen and its satellite villages and, as indicated above, in certain quarters of Aleppo.

7. Idlib Governorate (7%); the entire Governorate, its cities and towns, rose in protest.

8. Deir Ezzor Governorate (5.64%); all cities and towns in the Governorate rose up, as well.

9. Latakia Governorate (4.86%); the city of Latakia witnessed the largest demonstrations and suffered the harshest repression as a result, because, as the regime sees it, it is the capital of the countryside that surrounds it and therefore needs to be isolated and made to feel threatened. The Governorate's largest town, Jabla, also held demonstrations and the regime responded by perpetrating massacres. Both Latakia and Jabla are still cut-off.

10. Deraa Governorate (4.72%); the entire Governorate rose up and the scared groups there are too few to mention. The army, security forces and the shabbiha are heavily present in the district of Hauran and its towns, whose citizens hail from diverse religious backgrounds.

11. Al-Raqqa Governorate (4.4%); there was a relatively strong turnout in this Governorate's rural areas early on in the revolution, although its main city by the same name played a very small role in the revolution compared to other cities in the Al-Jazira region. On the other hand, the city of Tabaqa, the second largest city in the Governorate, rose up, although Al-Raqqa did eventually take part in subsequent Friday demonstrations.

12. Tartous Governorate (3.86%); the city of Tartous demonstrated earlier on in the revolution and was brutally suppressed, though we should bear in mind what happened in the Governorate's main city of Banias. Particularly notable in this Governorate is the village of Baida and its demonstrations. It should therefore not fall under the silent block category.

13. Al-Sweida' Governorate (1.78%); the region of Shahba rose up, as did groups of activists from various parts of the Governorate, from among whom several martyrs fell and many were detained. There are attempts by some of the Governorate's Druze tribal leaders to safeguard their close interests with the regime that entrusted them with the task of curbing the protests, and

exiling the protestors beyond the Governorate's borders. There were also interferences by Lebanese politicians, like Talal Arslan and Wi'am Wahab, who visited Suweida' for this specific purpose, though another leader, Walid Jumlat, was prevented from doing so on account of his qualified support for the revolution. There were demonstrations during the last month in several villages in solidarity with the citizens of Deraa.

14. Al-Quneitra Governorate (0.41%); the majority of the Governorate's citizens took to the streets in protest, including the occupied Golan Heights which citizens have been living since 1967 in various areas of Damascus, including Al-Hajar Al-Aswad and its environs, like Sayeda Zeinab.

I believe that, through a simple mathematical exercise, we will find that the majority of Syria's citizens, sects, religions and ethnic groups are indeed taking active part in the revolution.

I will end with a few remarks: could we consider those cities and towns that went out on several demonstrations, were harshly suppressed as a result and are now keeping their peace, such as Tartus, Al-Raqqa and certain areas of Aleppo, as silent blocs? I think this would also be an attack on objective research. Nevertheless, this doesn't exclude the fact that there might be some remnants of a small, marginal silent bloc, especially in the city of Aleppo, for reasons that have to do with the city itself, which could include the element of fear as we tried to show earlier. We did see, however, a few pockets of nationalist sentiments emerge from among this bloc in support the revolution, not to mention the thousands of activists from among the Christian community. We also witnessed in several areas successful attempts to escape the regime's grip on this community, such as the Orthodox Youth Movement in Zabadani and a number of churches in Hauran and Homs.

There is also the matter of the statements by some supporters of the Syrian regime in the

Syrian and Lebanese media, and some researchers in the West, who promote the notion that the revolution and its activists are concentrated in Sunni areas and that they come straight out of the mosques. The reason they come out of the mosques is well known to all those who know the situation in Syria well; the mosque is the only place where people can congregate in the shadow of the regime and the unjust laws in effect. As to why it is concentrated in Sunni areas, it is above all due to objective reasons, since over 75% of Syria's population is Sunni and therefore the harm caused to the country by the theft and corruption of the regime, including the destruction of the middle class, has harmed them directly. Despite all that, this rebellious group has displayed a heightened sense of citizenship and an acute sense of national belonging towards their country and fellow citizens of all backgrounds. Activist Sami Hassan says on his Facebook page, "The fact that activism is concentrated in some areas more than others is simply the outcome of the regime's implementation of uneven policies and measures in different parts of the country, especially in the security domain. We cannot deny, of course, that there is some apprehension and fear by some as to the nature of this activism and what will follow in the event of the regime's downfall, fears further stoked up by the regimes itself and some erroneous behaviour on the part of some of the revolution's activists. However, could this also be an excuse to justify their negative attitude vis-à-vis the revolution?"

Syrian researcher Ali Abdullah says, "The revolution is dispelling, one after the other, the values entrenched in Syria during the regime of tyranny and coercion, and is now sowing the seeds of alternative values with an entirely new flavour, a flavour that comes straight out of the revolution. The revolutionaries were thus not so surprised when one of their glorious Fridays was given the name "Azadi" (a Kurdish word that means freedom)." What is amazing is that banners in Kurdish were brandished in Homs, a city where there are very few Kurds; Kurdish

voices were heard at demonstrations calling for freedom and for the regime's downfall, in both Arabic and Kurdish, and banners were raised in Kurdish, Arabic and Syriac. In a direct and clever move, the people succeeded in dismantling the national persecution and political alienation nourished by the regime against the Kurds and Assyrians, and restored to Syria the special cachet and sense of humour lost during the decades of despotism."

Here we are in the twelfth month of the revolution, and the revolution is only growing bigger and the killing and coercion only becoming fiercer. Yet, recent Friday have witnessed 500 demonstration in different parts of the country, a 25% increase than previous Fridays, and the number of martyrs is growing despite the presence of Arab observers. Where then is the "silent bloc" they are talking about?