



Report seminar

Discourse Analysis and the Syrian Regime

Presentation by Aurora Sottimano*

3 December 2009

University of Amsterdam

Sottimano has been studying Syrian authoritarianism and civil society from the point of view of discourse analysis. This perspective maintains that social facts are constructed within discourse, which is instrumental in defining what is right or wrong and the roles that political actors take. Therefore the rationality that a certain discourse possesses can and ought to be studied by political analysts. Agency is not something without context; people are acting in a world that is already socially and discursively constructed. Discourse analysis is important in authoritarian contexts because it shows how a dominant discourse works to discipline society from above and within.

Sottimano started on this thesis because of an unanswered question: why is the Ba'athist state still there? Steven Heydemann noted that Ba'athism still influences political life in Syria. The use of Ba'athist discourse explains the resilience of Ba'athism well after its collapse as a political ideology.

With the emergence of Ba'athism, a redefinition occurred of development and of the role of the state: the state became the only agent that could guarantee development and the economy became a terrain of political conflict. The main discursive mechanism which the Syrian regime still uses in its discourse is antagonism: Syrian social actors are taught to know who they are and who their enemy is. The allocation of people in predefined roles is a core mechanism of the Ba'athist way of government. The central ideas of Ba'athism are that change is possible only by remodeling society, and that progress is a linear trajectory, which goes from right principles to a just world through discipline and correct behavior. In the 1960s, Ba'athist leaders argued that Syria needed a revolution to get the class structure upside down. Radical change was necessary: the revolution marked a clean starting point for Ba'athists to reorganize Syrian society and promote popular associations under strict party supervision.

In the 1970s, Hafiz al-Assad started a 'correction' of Ba'athist policies, which entailed a renewed call for popular mobilization, for more struggle and sacrifice from the Syrian people. Before Assad, domestic policy was based on class struggle. Now the enemy was outside, therefore the nation had to be united, to form one front against common enemies such as Israel, the United States and imperialism. Antagonism was thus used as a tool to re-construct political relations inside Syria and redirect public concern from improving social conditions to defending the status quo. Thus Assad used Ba'athist language to change the trajectory of the country; to halt demands for more social policies in the name of the national need to remain united against the enemy. In that way, politically correct behavior was framed within a friend-foe paradigm and even everyday life became politicized.

Political legitimacy in Assad's Syria derived from untouchable principles defining what and who is right. Thus Ba'athist discourse designed what a person should believe. People in Syria were well aware of what was going on under the façade of Ba'athist ethics: many did not believe in the regime rhetoric and disagreed with official policy. Yet the opposition did not abandon the discursive mechanisms of antagonism; public criticism often stopped at saying that people did not 'believe' in official policy, but no further action was taken to question the red lines established by the dominant discourse.

With Bashar there is a further departure from Hafiz al-Assad's domestic policies. He inherited a weak state and an imposing authoritarian system in which negotiation of competing views and interests is disabled. Bashar started opening the economy in 'liberal' ways. Yet a resurrection of the Ba'ath party accompanied the adoption of the social market economy: in this formula, both liberalisation and the protection of the Ba'athist constituency remained guaranteed by the state. This presents a paradox: the Syrian social market economy is a strategy to empower the state and dis-empower all social forces; it is a slogan, not an economic strategy. As a discursive mechanism, this slogan allows the Syrian regime to remain above social parties, and to pose as the sole possible guarantor of stability and equity.

In conclusion: Syrian civil society and citizenship are not able to play an important transformational role because of the conditionality imposed on social action by an authoritarian discourse, which still shapes patterns of sociability and state-society relations.

Discussion

There is a difference between rhetoric, discourse and ideology. The term 'Rhetoric' has a negative connotation; it usually defines a narrative style which is openly phony and not real. An ideology however is real: it is a body of knowledge, values and programmes which has founders and followers, and logic of its own. A discourse does not have to have a founder and cannot be equated to a political program or reduced to the intentions of pre-existing social actors. It has rationality, including normative codes and other discursive strategies, of which ambiguous meanings and rhetoric are an integral part.

There is a list of components of Ba'athist discourse - including the idea of social progress and modernity - that fit in the historical international context of that time. There was little possibility that Aflaq would come with his ideas if he wasn't studying in Paris, if it wasn't the 1950s and 1960s, the time of Nasser, of international socialism with Soviet Union backing. International and regional conditions surely contributed to the rise of Ba'athism.

Sottimano accepts that the discourse that has come forward in her study is a discourse from the part of the regime, because she gathered her data from official sources. But she also stressed that in the authoritarian Syrian context, political discourse inevitably comes from the regime and civil engagement cannot develop in isolation of the dominant discourse. Hence the necessity to address the dynamics of civil society in terms of the norms, patterns of interaction and roles that map Syrian political discourse.

The way in which progress and reform have been problematised in Syria by the Ba'athists is still fundamental in understanding the path taken by Syrian authoritarianism. The claim to knowledge about progress and to a monopoly on truth and justice vis-à-vis morally disqualified enemies still informs the notions of national interest and identity; it frames the room for maneuver of Syrian social actors; and it is instrumental in establishing a specific kind of authority and power.

The continuity in Syrian politics is not only on a rhetorical level: the Syrian regime is actually introducing reforms using the Ba'athist discursive frame, which does not open gates for alternatives and establishes norms of social behavior that can be transgressed only at a price. Widespread attitudes of disengagement at the popular level, as well as exclusionary and state-centered practices in civil society activities, indicate how deeply the Ba'athist authoritarian discourse has permeated Syrian society, and show the need to address the challenges faced by civil society movements in terms of their discursive practices.

* Aurora Sottimano holds a PhD degree in Politics from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, and a Laurea degree in Oriental Studies from the University of Turin (Italy), where she pursued a second Laurea in International Political Science. She is currently a research fellow in the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia at the University of Amsterdam. Her research focuses on Syria and Middle East politics; the political economy of development and liberalisation; and authoritarian governance. Her publications include *Changing Regime Discourse in Syria*, Lynne Rienner Publishers 2008. (101765@soas.ac.uk)

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