



On the Subject of the Personal Biography of Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad

The medals, testimonials, honour and other rewards which Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad obtained and which gave him recognition, in themselves, constitute a personal biography, which speaks of his many achievements and of his diverse and outstanding contributions to the various fields covered by his scientific, intellectual, social and political activities.

These testimonials came from long-standing and respectable international scientific institutions and are evidence of the notable standing Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad holds at an international level. He is known for the breadth and depth of his knowledge, as well as his great achievements in fulfilling his political responsibilities at both the party and state levels, as well as in international relations.

He upholds a balance between the commitment to abide by defined theoretical and ideological positions which amount to the party's constitution on the one hand, and the intent to ensure that this commitment is a real embodiment of the ambitions and hopes of the broader population in all strata of society on the other. This is because at an early stage he understood full well that most groups of people in Syria – much as those across the world - do not support or embrace party political practices which cannot achieve the aims and objectives of the people in any field. In fact, those practices can sometimes even shift to become opposed to the hopes and ambitions of the people by giving absolute priority to the party which, little by little, turns away from public life and engage in its own internal disputes. The final result of this is usually that the relationships within the party are shattered. This transforms the party framework into nothing more than a set of disputes and different unprincipled factions with a personal nature rather than being organized as one collective group. This is fatal both to the party and to political activity.

It is known that at an early stage, Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad, contested dictatorship in various forms. When he was a student, he took part in all the public activities which took place in Syria during dictatorial rule during the eras of Husni Al-Zaim (March 1949-August 1949) and Adib Ashishakli (notably 1949-1954). He also opposed all totalitarian ideologies, whether they claimed to be communist or religious extremist. He considered that a true politician was one who was in tune with the various social strata of the nation, especially the poor, who were faced with challenges in providing for their families and educating their children.

He paid the price of his opposition by being targeted several times. This included imprisonment on numerous occasions and at various stages of Syria's political development, dating back to the union with Egypt; the United Arab Republic (UAR) (February 1958-September 1961). This was due to the authoritarian character of the government at that time. He was also imprisoned during the time of rebellion against the union, the time known as the era of secession.

Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad joined the Baath party in 1952 and became very sympathetic to its cause and in tune with the people and environment around him. This made him more inclined to adopt a practical and realistic attitude, particularly as there was a discrepancy between some of the mottos and slogans of the time and the actual reality on the ground. This caused him to become entirely opposed to the new dictatorship practised by the secessionists. Indeed, though they declared to the people that their rebellion against union with Egypt had been driven by their opposition to dictatorship they were practicing themselves a form of authoritarian dictatorship. Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad took part in the rebellion against the dictatorial authority of the secessionists during the time of Amin Al-Hafez's military Baathist regime and did not relent in his opposition to the dictatorship of Michel Aflaq and to the groups belonging to Amin Al-Hafez and Mohammed Amran.

Al-Assad then put into effect what was called 'The 23rd February Movement' when he engineered the change to overcome those groups in 1966. The movement resulted in the members of the groups escaping to Baghdad where they joined forces with the Iraqi Baath Party. A new leadership took their place which was formally headed by Nourudin Alatasi though in reality led by Salah Jedid. The new leadership began to practise a particular type of dictatorship with its own different style, which was underhanded, authoritarian and concealed facts from the public.

Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad's opposition to dictatorship continued when he collaborated with a group of civilian and military individuals who joined forces with him in order to overthrow the new regime. He did this in 1970 in what was known as the 'Corrective Movement'. It was through this movement that Hafez Al-Assad seized power. It should be noted, however, that when it came to ideas about returning the power to the people, President Hafez Al-Assad did not always agree with Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad's group and refused to cooperate with it. The President promised that power would be returned to the people by restoring some institutions after their removal during the period between 1963 and 1970. He also promised to open Syria up to the Arab and non-Arab world, so that Syria would regain its central influence upon regional and international affairs.

However, it was not long before the President put forward a new political statement, namely, that the wording of the constitution would have to be based on freedom in a manner which was in harmony with those seeking the liberation of the occupied Arab territories. Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad agreed on this reluctantly due to his fears that it may be merely a pretext or a new act of deception through the means of which it was intended to lay the foundations of a distinctive type of dictatorship. He was not entirely convinced that this political statement formed the basis for genuinely establishing a new political regime.

After the end of the October war of 1973, Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad sent President Hafez Al-Assad a letter in which he requested him, for the benefit of the Syrian people, to utilize the positive outcomes of the war by relinquishing his power and returning to the ranks of the Armed Forces. For the sake of truth and history, it should be stated that the President made a positive start, and orally expressed his willingness to work in this direction.

Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad did not stop at this. He - and with him all those who believed in change for liberation along with the democrats - demanded a temporary suspension of the socialism which had done great harm to the national economy and morale. However, it is evident that from 1974 onwards, Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad - and those who supported him in putting forward this policy - became the direct target of the President and his aides. Any expression of the opinion that called for change or the suspension of socialism was equivalent to committing a political crime.

However, this pressure and intimidation - along with the biased rumours which were stirred up about Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad and his companions - did not prevent democracy from taking its course. The party elections in 1975 were a great step forward for democracy in which it achieved important results; the symbols and principles of dictatorship were quieted. Half of the members of the dictatorship were able to continue as leaders as the proponents of democracy were unable to overpower them. This was due

to the many biased accusations which were heaped upon the supporters of democracy. It was alleged that they were trying to gain a good reputation for themselves internationally by merely raising up the slogan of democracy and the need for democratic rule. Utilising this smokescreen of biased accusations, the President and his allies managed once again to return to a position of leadership, which enabled them to retain the majority of the leading positions. The leadership continued along its despotic, dictatorial path, which placed all the civilians and military persons who agreed with the democratic school of thought in the line of fire; foremost among them, Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad.

It was in this context that, during the first leadership meeting after the elections, the aforementioned individuals decided to oust Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad from the army, leaving him in a merely nominal, rather than practical, military position. The unit that Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad headed - number 569 - was considered a reserve unit for the highest leader of the army, Hafez Al-Assad. In actual fact this unit acted directly under the president's authority. Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad was then handed the administration of higher education, although they had been content with nominal oversight of these sectors in the past.

The president had already transformed this unit into his own republic guard and consistently weakened it despite the unrivalled loyalty it had shown him. He had brought other officers that supported him into this unit who had immediately begun forming secret groups and organisations within the unit. Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad had sensed that something strange was going on in the unit; particularly due to the role the president's late eldest son, Bassel, was playing and the influence he was trying to have over the units and their facilities. No sooner had Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad protested against this than the president confronted him by taking an overarching decision to separate military personnel from political personnel, preventing any mixing between the two.

It may be useful to mention here that in reality, the party did not lead the state but rather oversaw the organisation of the institutions of the state which were headed directly by the president. This means that the party merely served the president and the state which subsequently submitted to the president. The situation, then, that existed was 'one-man-rule politics' and individual authority. In this context, the party consequently becomes deficient and redundant, disconnected from both society and the state.

Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad knew that working for change required a consistent ideological struggle. Change meant a transformation of mentality and a move away from demographic and authoritarian practices at the root level and not in a superficial way.

With this in mind, he began an ideological movement within the party calling for a change in the constitution as it was, in reality, the constitution of one man and did not express the interests and desires of the people. It had been implemented and enforced during the sensitive conditions at the time following the Corrective Movement. The situation did not change from what it had been 23 years earlier although this time the authoritarianism had gained from the experiences of the past which was then codified in the state practice by way of a nominal constitution and nominal elections which produced paralysed institutions. Proponents of change and freedom unanimously decided it was necessary to confront this dictatorship on ideological and political levels.

When the president sensed this, he tightened his grip on the army, which included unit 569 and the Defence Companies which had been charged with protecting the military air bases and which had not participated in any activities outside of them.

The Defence Companies, 'Saraya Al-Difaa', were considered part of the units and was entitled as such when Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad was still in preparatory college before the March Movement 1963. Although these units were in the air base, they became a place of copious rumours and accusations. It must be noted that the unit 569 was responsible for its own training and had an excellent reputation among the armed forces and among the Syrian population and it was always at the forefront at the

different military levels. This is why the unit became known as the Defence Companies. It was connected with the air force which provided the salaries of its members.

Hafez Al-Assad was the first leader of the Defence Companies when he was the first lieutenant at the military air base 'Al-Mazze'. At this point he changed its name from The Guard and Defence Companies to 'The Defence Companies' after he became head of the air force.

Throughout his life, then, Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad has proved himself to be a man of integrity with the courage to stand firm for what he believes in. This has at times led him into difficult situations and has caused him to have a strained relationship with the government of Syria, which is still the case today with the current regime headed by President Bashar Al-Assad, the former President Hafez Al-Assad's son. However, he still holds firm to his ideologies and his hope to see Syria as a country governed by the highest standards of Justice, Peace and Freedom. Through his experiences and during his time spent abroad more recently, this vision has expanded into a global one, where he now strives to see these values implemented on an international level and for people from all nations to come together with a unified and universal ideology of Justice, Peace and Freedom.