

THE SPEECH OF A CORNERED PRESIDENT

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On Sunday, January 6th, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad spoke for the first time on television for more than seven months. Speaking to supporters gathered at the House of Arts and Culture of Damascus, he presented an ersatz “transition plan” rejecting any responsibility for the civil war on “terrorists funded from abroad.” He summoned external actors to cease providing material aid to the rebellion and challenged the existence of a real opposition, equating, without mentioning explicitly the “Free Syrian Army” and the “National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces” to terrorist groups, criminals and saboteurs. True to the position he adopted at the beginning of the conflict, Bashar al-Assad also denounced the attacks on national unity allegedly perpetrated by opponents of the regime. Finally, he reiterated his determination to exercise power until the end of his term and to put himself forward for his own succession in 2014.

Dismay of the opposition and the international community

Proposals by Bashar al-Assad to put an end to the crisis - the organization of a national conference, the drafting a new national charter, holding new elections, the formation of a national unity government and the promulgation of an amnesty general - were postponed without appeal by the main opposition forces, both in Syria and abroad. The principal requirement of the FSA and the coalition of the opposition remains indeed the immediate and unconditional departure of Bashar al-Assad, who they hold responsible for the massacre of nearly 80,000 people since March 2011. This rejection makes any cohabitation impossible in the context of a negotiated transition process and disqualifies in advance any solution including maintaining the power of the Master of Damascus.

Reactions in Western capitals to Bashar al-Assad’s speech have also been particularly severe. The spokesman for the U.S. State Department, Victoria Nuland, said that the plan was completely detached from reality, and was “yet another attempt by the regime to cling to power.” The European Union has also rejected the initiative, saying that only the withdrawal of the Syrian President would open a political transition. Note the particularly virulent reaction on Twitter expressed by the French Minister of Foreign Affairs Laurent Fabius: “We knew that Bashar was a murderer of his people, we can hear in listening to his appalling speech that he is also deaf and blind.”

Dramatic situation on the ground

While the protagonists of the civil war strive to propose unrealistic peace plans to preserve their international image, the population is subjected to living conditions more precarious every day. In addition to fighting and government repression, the Syrian people must face the poor weather conditions that hit the Middle East and hinder the delivery of humanitarian aid. During his daily press briefing on January 8, the spokesperson for the Secretary General of the UN, Martin Nesirky, said that UN agencies and their humanitarian partners were faced with persistent obstacles: insecurity, attacks, road closures, petrol shortages, bad weather conditions in neighbouring countries and lack of access to areas affected by the conflict.

The World Food Programme (WFP) for its part has estimated one and a half million Syrians have benefited from its assistance, while at least a million others did not have access, in particular due to the inability to use the port of Tartus. Recall that the WFP has evacuated its staff from the cities of Homs, Aleppo, Tartus and Quamsily because of security risks. In parallel, the UN agency for refugees (UNHCR) reported that more than 100,000 people tried to flee the fighting in the month of December, bringing the total number of refugees registered or awaiting to be to more than 600,000. This situation has become increasingly difficult for the UNHCR to manage, which is demonstrated by the riots this week which exploded this week because of the deterioration of living conditions in camps in Jordan.

One goal: to retain power

As well as the speech of Bashar al-Assad, the reactions of the opposition and the international community underline the blocking which characterizes Syrian crisis. The proposals issued last Sunday differ only slightly from those of the international plans laid down over the months by Kofi Annan, the UN negotiator Lakmhir Brahimi or even Iran. The backdrop of this speech has not changed significantly since his speech in the Parliament on March 30th 2011, its evocation of a "national dialogue" in June of the same year or the announcement of a constitutional referendum in January 2012. This position, which suffers from a total lack of credibility, based also always on Russia, who suggested opening a dialogue transition in which Bashar al-Assad would retain power.

More than ever, the crux of the crisis is the personal fate of Bashar al-Assad, whose concerns seem far from the stagnation of the country in a civil war and the plight of the population. The stagnation of military operations and the defection of several dignitaries of the regime nevertheless dented the confidence of his own supporters. Given this context, we can consider that the primary purpose of the statement at the House of Arts and Culture was to reassure after months of media silence, and not to propose concrete steps towards a settlement of the crisis. Beyond imprecations against terrorists and "foreign agents" and calls for rhetorical dialogue, the central point of the speech was the resolution of al-Assad to buy time and to bet on the faltering rebellion to remain in place, even on a field of ruins.

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