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country report

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One choice in Damascus

The presidency in Syria has already been decided

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On Wednesday, May 26th 2021, presidential elections will be held in Syria, the winner has already been determined: incumbent Bashar al-Assad. The elections are undemocratic, more than half of the Syrian population and opposition candidates are excluded from voting, while political repression and the electoral law obstruct any real alternatives. Assad's reelection is likely to impede a political transition process for another seven years at least.

Assad's fourth term in office

For the second time after the start of the conflict in March 2011, Syria will hold presidential elections. In 2014, Assad won 88,7 percent of votes. As usual, his victory is predetermined, granting him another seven years in office. After he took over the presidency from his father Hafez in 2000, the election was rather a referendum on the presidential candidate, people could only vote for Assad, the same was repeated in 2007. Since 2012, due to a constitutional amendment, other competitors have been allowed to run for elections as well. However, all of them had been appointed by the regime and vetted by the intelligence services (*mukhabarat*) beforehand.

Western states as well as the United Nations (UN) have declared the upcoming elections as unlawful and undemocratic. In an interview with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) a US diplomat said the conditions in Syria do not allow for free and fair elections. The result is therefore "not credible" and will not lend any legitimacy to Assad's presidency.¹ Gilles Bertrand, Chargé d'Affaires of the European Union to Syria, explained during a meeting with KAS that the elections do not signal political progress and will thus not lead to change in the EU's position: "They are not in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Therefore, they cannot contribute to the settlement of the conflict nor lead to any measure of international normalization with Damascus. We are nowhere near a process where all Syrians, including the millions of internally displaced people, refugees and members of the diaspora, would be allowed to participate without constraints, in a safe and neutral environment."²

Assad's allies Russia and Iran, however, consider them legitimate. A Russian expert on Syria said Resolution 2254 calls for free and fair elections only after the opposition and the Syrian government agree on a new constitution. In the absence of this, elections can continue to take place in accordance with existing law; which thus means that the upcoming election do not contradict the UN decision, added the Russian expert.³

How do Syrians view the elections?

Except for Assad's diehard followers, most Syrians including many of those living in regime-controlled territories think the election is a farce. Only those outside the country dare speak the truth or call for a boycott. Louay Hussein, a prominent opposition figure and president of the organization *Building the Syrian State* who fled Syria in 2015, told KAS: "These are sham elections. There is neither freedom of speech nor freedom of opinion in Syria." The high

¹ Interview with a US diplomat working on Syria, May 20, 2021.

² Interview with the Chargé d'Affaires of the European Union to Syria, Gilles Bertrand, May 20, 2021 in Beirut.

³ Interview with a Russian expert on Syrian, May 17, 2021.

level of repression of anyone who publicly declares his opposition to Assad does not allow for a democratic electoral process.⁴ Those who do not vote for him must expect harassment by the regime; they might lose their job, face imprisonment or even torture. Hence, many only support him to avoid such repressive measures. Assad's power solely rests on his intelligence apparatus and not on the free will of the voters. A Syrian interviewee said the elections will not yield any change as "the result is predetermined." The election will not change anything. However, not voting at all may lead to problems. In addition to describing regime intimidation, she criticizes the manipulated election process, which only strengthens Assad's authoritarian dictatorship. Speaking of a fair vote under these circumstances is "the peak of hypocrisy".⁵

Who can vote and where?

Elections are primarily held in government-controlled areas. The Kurdish-controlled Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria does not take an active part in them but has allowed ballot boxes to be placed in Baath party offices. The estimated four million people living in the northwestern province of Idlib and parts of the northern province of Aleppo under the control of Islamist militias and Turkey are not voting. On May 20th, Syrians living abroad could cast their vote in Syrian embassies across many countries. Yet, they were only allowed to do so, if their passport displays a valid exit stamp. Most people who fled the regime's persecution did not receive such a stamp. As a result, the majority of the 6.6 million refugees are prohibited from voting. In this way, the regime effectively excludes over half of the population from the election. Given these restrictions, several countries – amongst them Germany – doubt the legitimacy of the election and have thus banned polling stations at Syrian embassies altogether.

Who can run for president?

The Syrian electoral law prevents government opponents from running for office: applicants need the approval of at least 35 members of the Syrian People's Council, which is dominated by Assad's Baath party. In addition, they must have lived in Syria for ten consecutive years prior to the elections. However, many members of the opposition fled abroad when the regime brutally suppressed protests in 2011. The judges of the Supreme Court, who are appointed by the president himself, ultimately decide on the admission of applicants. Thus, from a legal perspective, the nomination of a real opponent is forestalled from the outset.

Who are the current competing candidates?

In addition to Assad, two other candidates are running for president: Abdallah Sallum Abdallah and Mahmud Mer'ei. Both are largely unknown and have no established constituency. Louay Hussein holds: "There are no opposing candidates. Assad's competitors are just a formality in the attempt to fabricate the absurd image of democratic elections. They neither dare to criticize Assad nor do they have the courage to vote for themselves in the election." For a KAS partner from Suweida, they are mere "extras in a regime drama that is played according to a previously agreed-upon script." There is no difference between them and Assad, 'they are all part of the same gang.'⁶

⁴ Interview with Louay Hussein, May 18, 2021.

⁵ Interview with a Syrian partner, May 16, 2021.

⁶ Interview with Syrian partner, May 17, 2021.

A renegade aspirant in Egypt

For the first time, a candidate from the diaspora is running in these elections: the Syrian actor Jamal Suliman. In an interview with KAS, he explained his motivation behind the purely symbolic candidacy, as his name is not listed on the ballot papers. Political participation is a forbidden dream in Syria, says Suliman, "I want to break this taboo and encourage all Syrians to work towards a democratic Syrian society." However, for this to succeed, people who embody democratic and liberal values are needed. So far, the opposition has failed to put forth political leaders that are able to gain the trust of Syrians and the international community. Suliman would now like to unite them behind himself to present a future alternative to the current regime.⁷

Assad's victory is a defeat for Syria

Assad's renewed term in office certainly does not mean a better life for Syrians. The humanitarian and economic situation is catastrophic. Food prices have more than doubled in the past year, mainly due to runaway inflation. Many Syrians have to queue for hours to purchase bread; petrol and gas are scarce everywhere. According to the United Nations, 13.4 million people depend on humanitarian aid – two-thirds of the population. 12.4 million are threatened by starvation, 4.5 million more than in the previous year.⁸

Jamal Suliman says the suffering, fear and poverty is likely going to get worse in Syria because "the hell from which millions of people have fled is continuing." He suspects that the government's willingness to reform may shrink even further after the electoral victory. However, the US and the EU are making political progress a precondition for financial aid to reconstruct the largely destroyed country. A European diplomat emphasized: "We have no interest in dumping billions of Euros onto a regime, which will then be burned in the same corrupt network with its mafia-like and rotten structures as before." The regime must first show readiness for serious political and economic reform.⁹

So far, however, Assad has undermined every attempt to initiate change. For two years he has been blocking the constitutional committee, which includes members of the opposition and government meeting in Geneva. According to Louay Hussein, Assad will most likely change the constitution unilaterally and "the tyrannical nature of the regime will continue." Neither does the Russian expert believe that Assad is currently willing to initiate reforms; before anything else, the regime is looking to secure its position of power. Russia supports Assad in this endeavor. The Kremlin does not want "revolutionary changes but an evolutionary process." This however, will require more time, he stated.

In light of the ongoing suffering of the Syrian people, EU diplomat Gilles Bertrand highlights the urgency of swift and fundamental change: "For the country to stop sliding into instability and be able to turn towards the future, political change is needed. You cannot pretend that nothing has happened and rebuild the Syrian house on the same foundations that led to the 2011 collapse."

To the West the elections are a non-event

Internationally, Syria is largely isolated; European and US sanctions prevent almost everyone from doing business with the regime and thus, block the country's reconstruction. It is likely that Assad will use his electoral success to ease the embargo and normalize foreign political

⁷ Interview with Jamal Suliman, May 18, 2021.

⁸ See UN-OCHA, ["U.S. announces additional humanitarian assistance for the Syria crisis response"](#), March 20, 2021; and World Food Program, ["Twelve million Syrians now in the grip of hunger, worn down by conflict and soaring food prices"](#), February 17, 2021.

⁹ Interview with a European diplomat working on Syria, May 10, 2021.

relations. To the US and the EU, Assad's reelection means, first and foremost, that their political course of action towards the regime will remain unchanged. Gilles Bertrand opines that "as a close neighbor of Syria, the European Union's core interest is to see the country back on a path of sustainable stability, in a process decided by all Syrians under UN auspices. Without credible progress, and as long as the repression continues, the European Union will not change its policy." The EU is likely to coordinate respective efforts with its regional partners such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The US diplomat also calls on Assad to relinquish his uncompromising stance and to engage seriously in political dialogue. The regime's attempt to wait out the conflict will not result in the lifting of sanctions.

Assad must act

His reelection does not imply an increase in power for Assad as it is a mere formality. Assad's supporters will soon ask him about his strategy for the "day after", that is his future strategy for the country, which is currently in economic and political deadlock. However, the government has no answer to that. Dissatisfaction will likely grow and the regime may soon become even more repressive. Assad's only resort is to reach out to Europe and the US. As long as he is unwilling to compromise and continues to block a democratic transition, there must be no concessions. Not least because doing so could encourage other authoritarian regimes to behave in similar ways.

Under the given circumstances, international organizations should continue to support Syrian civil society in building democratic structures beyond the authoritarian Syrian state, which, in the event of regime change, could lay the foundation for a new democratic beginning.

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