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# What do the Syrian presidential elections mean for a political solution?

Unit for Political Studies

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### Unit for Political Studies

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# Table of Contents

Electoral Procedure .....	1
A Story of Numbers .....	2
The Implications of the Presidential Elections for a Political Solution .....	3
Conclusion .....	4



On 26 May, the Syrian regime held presidential elections in which two unknown candidates, Mahmoud Ahmad Marei and Abdullah Salloum Abdullah, ran against sitting president, Bashar al-Assad. The following day, Speaker of the People's Council, Hammouda Sabbagh, announced that al-Assad had won a fourth term in the presidential elections of the Syrian Arab Republic with 95.2% of the vote, while Marei received a little more than 3% and Salloum received 1.5%.<sup>(1)</sup> Although the results seem to have been prepared before voters even headed to the polls, the regime treated these elections as a “declaration of victory” in a war that has lasted about ten years, against the Syrians who rose up to challenge the Assad regime’s rule. Assad was keen to cast his vote in the city of Douma, a city laden with symbolic connotations, given that it was besieged by the regime from 2012-2018, and bombed it with chemical weapons in August 2013, before the Russian-Iranian supported forces entered in 2018 and displaced much of the population, forcing them into the opposition areas in the north.

## Electoral Procedure

The regime insisted on holding the presidential elections within the constitutional dates, i.e. within 60 - 90 days of the end of the incumbent president’s term, as stipulated in the first paragraph of Article 85 of the 2012 constitution. This was despite the strong criticism of the move from various international powers, who argue that the elections should be the culmination of a political solution and held in a free and fair environment in which all Syrian citizens, inside and outside Syria, participate. The elections were held under the control of the regime’s security apparatus, which contradicts any freedom and integrity, even as a formality. More than half of the Syrian people were forcibly absent due to war and displacement and the regime only allowed Syrians abroad who have identification papers and have left the country through one of the regime-controlled border crossings to vote. Those who are in regime-controlled areas do not have the freedom to express their will; people were forced to vote and had their fingers searched to prove that they did not boycott the elections, with those who did not vote or celebrate the result investigated by the security services.

All the initiatives for a political solution, including the first Arab initiative on 10 September 2011, the second Arab initiative on January 22, 2012, the Kofi Annan plan in April 2012, and the Geneva 1 statement on 30 June 2012, and finally Security Council Resolution No. 2254 issued in December 2015, deal with all the details of the Syrian crisis. They link the holding of elections to a political solution and a transitional or national unity government to oversee their organization. Even the constitutional path established by Russia under the Astana process and the Sochi conference in January 2018 understood that the elections would take place after a draft constitution was agreed upon by a Constitutional Committee formed by the countries sponsoring the Astana process (Russia, Turkey and Iran). But Russia surprised everyone by separating the holding of elections from the agreement on the draft constitution, when the Russian Foreign Minister visited Damascus in September 2020.<sup>(2)</sup>

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1 “Syria’s al-Assad re-elected for fourth term with 95% of vote” *Al Jazeera*, 28/5/2021 accessed on 1/6/2021 at: <https://bit.ly/3z5TkGp>

2 Imad Karkas, “Russia defies US sanctions and increases its support for the Syrian regime,” *The New Arab*, 7/9/2020, accessed on 1/6/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3z8Xygy>



This statement contradicts Lavrov himself when he spoke in June 2018 about the need for the Syrian people to determine the future of their country, “through new, free and fair elections, based on a new constitution for the country.”<sup>(3)</sup>

It was clear during the five rounds of negotiations held by the Constitutional Committee between agreeing on its formation in September 2019 and the spring of 2021, that the regime’s strategy is to gain time, and more accurately, waste time, until the elections are held, through which it would announce its rejection of any solution, or even compromise, eliminating any chance of reaching a political solution with the opposition.

## A Story of Numbers

Like all authoritarian regimes, the Syrian regime attaches great importance to the election stats, whether they participation or support rates, as it considers them a measure of its legitimacy that may be undermined by low levels of support or participation in them. Since the first presidential elections (referendum) in which Hafez al-Assad won 99.2% in 1971, high approval ratings have remained the norm in the eight presidential election rounds that followed, never dropping below 95 percent and reaching 99.9 percent in four rounds. The exception is the 2014 elections, when al-Assad won 88% of the votes, the first elections under the 2012 constitution. This forced the regime, under pressure from the revolution that erupted in 2011, to end the tradition of referendums, where the president is the only candidate as the Secretary-General of the Baath Party, which was, according to Article 8 of the 1973 constitution, the “leading party for the state and society,” and accept the principle of pluralism, whereby the president is one among other candidates competing for the presidency. However the tradition has become based on choosing unknown candidates, in emulation of the Egyptian and Tunisian models before the revolutions of 2011, as a procedural formality that feigns plurality without threatening the president’s chances of a landslide victory.

The results of the recent elections were clearly unreasonable, with voting and participation rates announced by the President of the Syrian People’s Assembly sparking widespread controversy about their credibility. The head of the council claimed that the participation rate in the elections represented 78.64% of the Syrian people at home and abroad who are entitled to vote, amounting to 14,239,140 people.<sup>(4)</sup> These figures reflected the regime’s refusal to recognize the demographic reality created by the crisis according to the three main determinants (number of births, number of deaths, migration and asylum resulting from the war), which completely altered the pre-crisis figures.<sup>(5)</sup> All international and local reports estimate that the number of Syrians residing in Syria in both regime and opposition areas and areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), does not exceed 16.5 million people, with 3 million in SDF areas, and about 4 million in opposition areas and little more than 9 million in

3 “Lavrov: Elections must be held according to a new constitution under the supervision of the United Nations in Syria,” Sputnik Arabic, 29/6/2018, accessed on 1/6/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3i8A0IQ>

4 “The President of the Syrian People’s Assembly announces the victory of Bashar al-Assad for a new presidential term,” Al Jazeera Live, YouTube, 27/5/2021, accessed on 1/6/2021, at: <https://ibit.ly/75nV>

5 Mada Shuraiki, “Demographic Rupture and Prospects of Population Dynamics in Syria”, In: *Istishraf* for Future Studies, No. 5 (Doha / Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2020).



the regime-controlled areas. Most statistics estimate that the number of people over the age of 18 who are entitled to vote in regime-controlled areas does not exceed 6 million. While the number of districts to which the ballot boxes were distributed was estimated at 270, elections were held in 154 of them, with no ballot boxes delivered to 46 districts, most notably in Daraa and Sweida. Ballot boxes were also not delivered to the remaining 70 districts, outside of regime control, Idlib, Hasaka, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, parts of Aleppo and Latakia. Thus, the results announced by the regime falsify (doubling) the approximate numbers of voters in the areas it controls.

Although these numbers further bring into question the integrity of the elections, which were worthy of ridicule, the regime sought to challenge its opponents and demonstrate its ability to rule by fraud despite all the atrocities it had committed against its people. In fact, the regime wanted these elections, and the scenes of crowds chanting for Assad and pledging to “walk behind him”, to send a message to Syrians and the international community announcing the end of the revolution and declaring his enforced victory, even if it was enforced by the power of a foreign country. For the regime, these results signal the start of the rehabilitation process on the regional and international stage, which al-Assad confirmed in his “victory” speech, saying, “The message to the enemies has arrived, and the national mission has been accomplished.”<sup>(6)</sup>

## The Implications of the Presidential Elections for a Political Solution

These presidential elections came as a fatal blow to the political efforts to resolve the crisis, which in recent years focused on the attempts of the United Nations Special Envoy to Syria, Geir O. Pedersen to breach the crisis through the constitutional path, enforced by the Russians in agreement with Turkey and Iran in the Astana process and the outcomes of the Sochi 2018 Conference. The elections that have extended Bashar al-Assad’s rule for seven years make any effort in this direction futile. They have weakened the chances of implementing Resolution 2254, which provides for the establishment of a transitional governing body to draw up a constitution to stipulate the conditions for elections to be held in which all Syrians inside and outside Syria participate.<sup>(7)</sup> This should serve as the last stop on the way to resolving the crisis. In this regard, Pedersen considered that these elections are not part of the path to a political solution in Syria.<sup>(8)</sup>

The regime has sought, through its “elections,” to send several messages, most importantly that it has won, that the crisis is behind it, and that the next stage is the stage of rehabilitation and return to the international arena. The regime is showing its opponents that they have lost and that they have to deal with it accordingly. In this sense, these elections aim to spread a state of frustration and despair among members of the Syrian opposition community, provoking their surrender and acceptance of

6 “Video of President al-Assad’s victory speech,” Sama TV, YouTube, 28/5/2021, accessed on 1/6/2021 at: <https://bit.ly/3vOCSs6>

7 United Nations, Security Council, Resolution 2254 (2015) Adopted by the Security Council at its 7588th meeting, on 18 December 2015, accessed on 6/1/2021, at: [https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2254\(2015\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2254(2015))

8 “United Nations: The ongoing elections in Syria are not part of the political process, and the solution to the conflict must be politically negotiated,” UN News, 5/26/2021, accessed on 6/1/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3cdWTAG>



the regime, indicating that they should not wait for any concessions, no matter how small. Assad read the elections as a mandate for him to finish off his war on the Syrians who dared revolt against him, as evident in his “victory speech.” He divided the Syrian people into two parts, painting the first as “the highest expressions of ‘patriotism’;” those who do not change their connection with the regime, whether by arms or by voting, and describing the audience of his supporters as the (true) “rebels,”<sup>9</sup> while describing his opponents as treasonous, and threatening them with severe repercussions and prosecution.

## Conclusion

Despite the festive atmosphere that the regime broadcast during the election campaign to cover up the fraudulent elections, the international community challenged their legitimacy and the United Nations refused to consider them a step towards a political solution. The regime hoped to raise the morale of its supporters that the world will have to open up to it and deal with it after these elections, but they do not change the fact that the Syrian crisis will remain open to all possibilities, including potentially renewed conflict. The regime will not be able, under any circumstances, to regain control over the parts it lost in the north, northwest, northeast, and southeast, which together represent more than a third of the country’s area, and include the largest part of its natural resources without entering into a political settlement. It will also not be able to tighten its grip on security even in the regime-controlled areas with if the deterioration of economic conditions, sinking quality of life and high rates of poverty and crime continue. In this sense, the “elections” will be just a passing station in the context of an ongoing crisis that will only end with a political solution. This responsibility is shared between both the Syrian people and the main regional and international actors, who should reiterate the Syrian crisis as not just a humanitarian or anti-terror issue but a national political problem in need of a negotiated solution.

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9 “Video of President al-Assad’s victory speech.”