Freedom to choose in Syria

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Freedom to Choose? Syrian Democracy & Ethnic Representation

"If democracy means that the people decide who will rule them and who represents them in the parliament, then, yes, Syria is going in this direction."

Ahmed al-Sharaa, 2025.

President of Syria

(January 29, 2025 –)

On 5 October 2025, a long-awaited event took place in Syria – the first election since the fall of the authoritarian regime of Bashar al-Assad. The parliamentary elections are part of a broader stabilisation policy pursued by the current president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, and his Syrian transitional gov-

ernment. The democratic elections will be crucial for the reconstruction of state institutions, particularly the People's Assembly of Syria. This brief aims to analyse the parliamentary elections in Syria and their impact on the state's stabilisation process.

Over the past ten months, despite some progress, the country has still not achieved full stability (UNDP, 2025). Representatives of minority groups, including the Kurds, Druze, Alawites, and Christians, remain particularly distrustful of the current government. One way to ease these tensions is to build public trust through a democratic electoral process. The most important aspect is that a victory by the ruling party, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), would legitimise the policies of the current president and grant them international recognition. However, analysts remain sceptical about whether this can be achieved, given the nature of how the elections were conducted — a question that this article seeks to explore.

Civil War in Syria

By 2011, social dissatisfaction caused by high unemployment, inflation, corruption, and authoritarian governments in North Africa and the Middle East led to a wave of protests known as the Arab Spring. While protests driven by public discontent brought about reforms and government changes through elections in many affected countries, some states plunged into war (Britannica, 2015).

In Syria, demonstrations against the authoritarian rule of former president Bashar al-Assad were brutally suppressed by the military and turned into an uprising, marking the beginning of a prolonged civil war (Ladsous, 2012). Soon, the conflict drew in other countries, involving not only regional and global powers but also terrorist organisations. Russian warplanes carried out bombings, while Iran sent allied forces—including Hezbollah and Iraqi militias—to support the Syrian army and assault rebel strongholds. Turkey and Israel opposed the ruling regime and seized border territories, while the United States also intervened militarily (Britannica, 2015).

In December 2024, Syrian rebels, mainly the HTS, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) trained by the United States, and the Syrian National Army (SNA) formed by Turkey, launched an offensive out of Idlib that quickly developed into an unprecedented rout of Assad's forces. After years of frozen frontlines, rebels entered the Syrian capital and overthrew Assad's authoritarian regime within a couple of weeks. Assad left Syria to seek refuge in Russia, while his prime minister, supported by the opposition, remained in office until the caretaker government was formed and later replaced by a transitional government in January 2025. Undoubtedly surprised by the total collapse of the Assad regime, al-Sharaa, leader of HTS, became the head of state. The government adopted a temporary constitution establishing a presidential system, with executive power vested in the president, who appoints ministers and serves without a prime minister. The document

defined Syria's basic law for a five-year transitional period from 2025 to 2030. The HTS-declared interim government issued an amnesty for those conscripted into Assad's government forces and dissolved the parliament (which had been dominated by Assad's Baathist party). The president also declared that Syria will go in the direction of democracy (CNN, 2025).

The flight of the president did not mean the end—not even the beginning of the end—but merely the end of the beginning of instability in Syria. The main challenges facing the new government now include the rebuilding of bureaucracy, international normalisation, economic development, and stable elections.

The Turbulent Politics of Inclusion

Although the fall of the previous government was welcomed in the West, the new government of al-Sharaa also raised certain concerns and doubts. This stems from the fact that he is the leader of HTS, an organisation with roots in al-Qaeda. During the civil war, HTS, the SNA, and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were all accused of human rights violations. HTS remains a proscribed terrorist organisation under the UN, EU, UK, and other jurisdictions.

After the change of government, incidents of violence have continued to be reported against minority groups in Syria, including Alawites (closely associated with the Assad government, as Assad himself is an Alawite), the Druze (whom Israel has pledged to protect), and Christians. Significant numbers of casualties occurred in the Alawite-dominated coastal regions in March and in Druze areas of southern Syria in July. A report commissioned by the interim government regarding the March violence attributed its origins to "remnants" of pro-Assad forces, although some perpetrators were members of the interim armed forces acting without "official authority". In response, the UN Security Council issued a collective presidential statement strongly condemning the widespread violence against Alawites (Mills & Loft, 2024).

For this reason, representatives of religious and ethnic minorities in Syria were concerned about the planned elections, in which citizens will not be voting directly. This decision is particularly troubling for smaller ethnic and religious groups, who fear being completely excluded from representation in the new parliament. In a country as diverse as Syria, where sectarian divisions still shape politics, the absence of a direct vote could mean the marginalisation of entire communities and, at the same time, reinforce the clan-tribal system. The government justifies this decision by pointing out that there are millions of internally and externally displaced persons and the lack of official documents and a population census. In addition, some members of parliament are to be appointed by the president.

Moreover, the elections were postponed in three provinces. This was justified by security and political reasons, as the vote was delayed in areas

outside government control, including Kurdish-held parts of northern and northeastern Syria, as well as the province of Suwayda, controlled by the Druze minority, leaving 21 seats vacant (Schaer, 2025).

Nevertheless, the West is counting on the stabilisation of the situation in Syria and supports the current government in this effort. This is primarily due to the fact that the EU asylum system is overloaded (in 2023 around 17% of asylum applications come from Syrians – Eurostat, 2024), and Brussels hopes to reduce immigration from Syria. On 20 May 2023, the European Union conditionally lifted economic sanctions, recognising the new authorities as a potential partner in the long-term reconstruction of the country (Council of the European Union, 2025). The United States also conditionally lifted sanctions and removed HTS's designation as a foreign terrorist organisation in July 2025 (United States Department of State, 2025).

The Uncertain Promise of Elections

On 5 October 2025, Syria held parliamentary elections to choose 119 of the 210 members of the People's Assembly, the country's unicameral legislature. Epitomising the first elections since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, organised under the authority of the Syrian transitional government headed by President Ahmed al-Sharaa. The new Assembly will be significantly expanded from the current 150 to 210 seats (Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2025). The electoral system is hybrid in nature: 140 members will be selected by local electoral bodies, which together comprise 6,000 electors, while the remaining 70 seats will be appointed directly by the president. Members of the new assembly will also serve two-and-a-half-year terms. The election results were recognised by Vladimir Putin during al-Sharaa's visit to Moscow on 16 October 2025, but the EU countries and the United States have not yet commented on the recognition of the election or its flaws (Nicholls et al., 2025). Firstly, the elections were supervised by the Supreme Judicial Committee for Elections, a government body appointed by al-Sharaa. Its composition was mostly male, with only two of the eleven members being women. The committee was responsible for establishing electoral subcommittees across the country, which in turn reviewed candidates for appointment to electoral colleges. Only those approved by these subcommittees were permitted to vote or nominate candidates. Predictably, women's participation in the subcommittees was very limited.

Secondly, the new parliament's goal will be to implement key domestic reforms, including participation in draughting a new constitution. However, the exclusions and selectiveness of the process itself undermine the Assembly's legitimacy. The presidential office has been accused of deliberately marginalising opposition groups and seeking to monopolise power. To mitigate this criticism, al-Sharaa may choose to appoint more women and minority representatives when finalising the remaining composition of the

parliament. Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that any significant opposition force will be represented in the legislature. Women secured only six of the 210 seats in the new assembly, alongside representatives of religious and ethnic minorities, including Kurds, Christians, and two Alawites (Kinda Alsamara et al. 2025). Exclusion was not merely reflected in the outcome, but it was engineered into the very structure of the process. According to UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen, who warned the Security Council, Syria's fragile progress toward recovery could rapidly collapse without inclusive governance, continued international assistance, and respect for the country's sovereignty (United Nations, 2025).

This arrangement reflects a clear political calculation. It enables the new leadership to ensure a predictable outcome while avoiding the challenges of organising nationwide elections at a time when Damascus lacks full territorial control and overall security remains fragile (Haid, 2025). The system also contradicts the president's statement made in his January 2025 interview with The Economist, in which he pledged to move toward democracy, promising that the people would decide who governs them and who represents them in parliament (Haid, 2025). If the government fails to deliver genuine political pluralism, it risks undermining its own legitimacy and further entrenching Syria's fragmentation, potentially increasing the danger of a renewed conflict.

Conclusion

The October 2025 parliamentary elections in Syria illustrate the challenges of transitioning from authoritarian rule to a functioning and stable state. While the elections might provide a framework for political legitimacy and institutional reconstruction, the nature of the parliamentary elections in Syria favours the ruling government and will not fulfil their primary purpose of representing Syrian society and legitimising the government. The hybrid nature of the process, the exclusion of certain minority groups, and voting through top-down appointed electoral bodies undermine the democratic character of the process and cast doubt on the country's further democratisation. The lack of representativeness has failed to deliver genuine democratic representation, particularly for minority groups and women. This could lead to further fragmentation of the state and push Syria into renewed conflicts with the numerous minorities residing within its territory.

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