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Freedom in the World 2012 - Syria

2012 Scores

Status: Not Free
 Freedom Score: 7.0
 Civil Liberties: 7
 Political Rights: 7

Overview

Responding to persistent popular protests that began in March, the government used the military and other security forces to pursue a violent campaign of repression in 2011, periodically besieging towns and killing several thousand people by year's end. The regime offered some nominal reforms, such as the repeal of the emergency law, but they had little practical effect as authorities continued to attack, detain, and abuse tens of thousands of Syrians, including journalists, political activists, and members of certain ethnic and religious groups.

The modern state of Syria was established as a League of Nations mandate under French control after World War I and gained formal independence in 1946. Periods of military and elected civilian rule alternated until the Arab Socialist Baath Party seized power in a 1963 coup, transforming Syria into a one-party state governed under emergency law. During the 1960s, power shifted from the party's civilian ideologues to army officers, most of whom were Alawites (adherents of a heterodox Islamic sect who make up 12 percent of the population). This trend culminated in General Hafez al-Assad's rise to power in 1970.

The regime cultivated a base of support that spanned sectarian and ethnic divisions, but relied on Alawite domination of the security establishment and the forcible suppression of dissent. In 1982, government forces stormed the city of Hama to crush a rebellion by the opposition Muslim Brotherhood, killing as many as 20,000 insurgents and civilians.

Bashar al-Assad took power after his father's death in 2000, pledging to liberalize Syria's politics and economy. The first six months of his presidency featured the release of political prisoners, the return of exiled dissidents, and open discussion of the country's problems. But in February 2001, the regime began to reverse this so-called Damascus Spring. Leading reformists were arrested and sentenced to lengthy prison terms, while others faced constant surveillance and intimidation by the secret police.

Reinvigorated by the toppling of Iraq's Baathist regime in 2003, Syria's dissidents began cooperating and pushing for the release of political prisoners, the cancellation of the emergency law, and the legalization of opposition parties. Syria's Kurdish minority erupted into eight days of rioting in March 2004, during which at least 30 people were killed and about 2,000 were arrested.

Despite hints that sweeping political reforms would be drafted at a major Baath Party conference in 2005, no substantial measures were taken. In October 2005, representatives of all three segments of the opposition – Islamists, Kurds, and secular liberals – signed the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change (DDDNC), which called for the country's

leaders to step down and endorsed a broad set of liberal democratic principles.

In May 2006, a number of Syrian political and human rights activists signed the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, which called for a change in Syrian-Lebanese relations and the recognition of Lebanese sovereignty. Many who signed were detained or sentenced to prison in a renewed crackdown on personal freedoms.

Al-Assad won another presidential term in 2007, with 97.6 percent of the vote. In results that were similarly predetermined, the ruling Baath-dominated coalition won the majority of seats in that year's parliamentary and municipal polls. Meanwhile, supporters of the DDDNC formed governing bodies for their alliance and renewed their activities, prompting another government crackdown that extended into 2008.

In 2010, the state continued to suppress dissenting views and punish government opponents. Nevertheless, the United States and European countries took tentative steps to improve relations with Damascus during the year.

A massive antigovernment uprising in 2011 dashed any hopes of further progress in Syria's foreign relations. The protests were sparked by the detention and reported torture of several children for writing antigovernment graffiti in the southern city of Dara'a in March, and they soon spread to central cities like Hama and Homs as well as towns along the Syrian-Turkish border. The authorities' extensive use of live fire and military hardware against civilian demonstrators led small groups of soldiers to desert and organize antigovernment militias, raising fears of a civil war. The United Nations estimated in December that over 5,000 people had died in the uprising, with tens of thousands injured or detained.

Throughout the year, the government maintained that it was under attack from armed, foreign-backed terrorists, rather than a domestic, civilian protest movement. Still, it made a few largely symbolic concessions, repealing the country's long-standing emergency law and promising future constitutional changes. Attempts to establish a dialogue between the government and opposition collapsed amid the ongoing violence.

The regime's actions increasingly drew objections and punitive measures from the international community, including the United States, Europe, the Arab League, and Turkey, which had previously built close ties with the Assad administration. By year's end, Turkey was hosting thousands of Syrian refugees, as well as a civilian opposition Syrian National Council and representatives of the Free Syrian Army, which claimed to be coordinating antigovernment militias inside Syria. However, Russia and China blocked proposed actions against Syria by the UN Security Council. An Arab League monitoring mission to Syria in December did little to halt the unrest.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Syria is not an electoral democracy. Under the 1973 constitution, the president is nominated by the ruling Baath Party and approved by popular referendum for seven-year terms. In practice, these referendums are orchestrated by the regime, as are elections for the 250-seat, unicameral People's Council, whose members serve four-year terms and hold little independent legislative power. Almost all power rests in the executive branch.

The only legal political parties are the Baath Party and its several small coalition partners in the ruling National Progressive Front (NPF). Independent candidates, who are heavily vetted and closely allied with the regime, are permitted to contest about a third of the People's Council seats, meaning two-thirds are reserved for the NPF. The government promised in 2011 to initiate a process of constitutional reform with the aim of easing the Baath Party's political dominance, but constitutional changes made toward year's end took a vague approach to political parties and aimed instead at reinforcing President Bashar al-Assad's own power.

Corruption is widespread and rarely carries serious punishment, and bribery is often necessary to navigate the bureaucracy. Regime officials and their families benefit from a range of illicit economic activities. Syria was ranked 129 out of 183 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of expression is heavily restricted. The penal code and a 2001 Publications Law criminalize the publication of material that harms national unity, tarnishes the state's image, or threatens the "goals of the revolution." Many journalists, writers, and intellectuals have been arrested under these laws. Apart from a few radio stations with non-news formats, all broadcast media are state owned. However, satellite dishes are common, giving most Syrians access to foreign broadcasts. More than a dozen privately owned newspapers and magazines have sprouted up in recent years, but during the 2011 turmoil even the most established of them dealt only obliquely with domestic political issues. The 2001 press law permits the authorities to arbitrarily deny or revoke publishing licenses and compels private print outlets to submit all material to government censors. It also imposes punishment on reporters who do not reveal their sources in response to government requests.

During 2011, journalists frequently went missing or were jailed. In December, Reporters Without Borders estimated that at least 15 journalists remained in extended detention, including bloggers and online dissidents. Foreign journalists also faced detention and travel restrictions. In late March and early April, four Reuters journalists were detained for several days. A reporter for the Qatar-based satellite television station Al-Jazeera was released in May after being held for three weeks and deported to Iran. In September, a journalist from the pan-Arab newspaper *Al-Hayat* was arrested, and as of December, his fate remained unclear. The prominent blogger Razan Ghazzawi was also arrested in early December and released two weeks later.

Syrians access the internet only through state-run servers, which block more than 200 sites associated with the opposition, Kurdish politics, Islamic organizations, human rights, and certain foreign news services, particularly those in Lebanon. Social-networking and video-sharing websites are also blocked. E-mail correspondence is reportedly monitored by intelligence agencies, which often require internet café owners to monitor customers. The government has also been successful in fostering self-censorship through intimidation. In 2011, the risks of citizen journalism via the internet increased, with two citizen journalists killed in Homs in November and December. The Syrian Electronic Army, a progovernment hacking group, also attacked a series of antigovernment websites with apparent backing from the Assad regime.

Although the constitution requires that the president be a Muslim, there is no state religion in Syria, and freedom of worship is generally respected. However, the government tightly monitors mosques and controls the appointment of Muslim religious leaders. All nonworship meetings of religious groups require permits, and religious fundraising is closely scrutinized. Mosques frequently became sites of violence in 2011, as government forces attempted to prevent gatherings of worshipers from turning into protests. The Alawite minority dominates the internal security forces and the officer corps of the military, while the military rank and file tends to be Sunni. Sunni soldiers face pressure and persecution from their Alawite superiors, and it is believed that hundreds of Sunni troops deserted or mutinied in 2011 in response to orders to fire on mostly Sunni protesters. Some activists interpreted the October assassination of the son of Ahmad Hassoun, Syria's leading Sunni cleric, as an attempt by the regime to incite sectarian violence. Other signs of sectarian polarization included apparent tit-for-tat killings between neighborhoods dominated by different religious groups in Syria's more restive cities.

Academic freedom is heavily restricted. Several private universities have been founded in recent years, and the extent of academic freedom within them varies. University professors have been dismissed or imprisoned for expressing dissent, and some were killed during the 2011 uprising. In one week in September, for example, four professors in Homs were assassinated.

Freedom of assembly is closely circumscribed. Public demonstrations are illegal without official permission, which is typically granted only to progovernment groups. The security services intensified their ban on public and private gatherings starting in 2006, forbidding any group of five or more people from discussing political and economic topics. Surveillance and extensive informant networks have enforced this rule and, until antigovernment sentiment erupted in 2011, ensured that a culture of self-censorship and fear prevailed. Illegal protests throughout the year were met with gunfire, arrests, and alleged torture.

Freedom of association is severely restricted. All nongovernmental organizations must register with the government, which generally denies registration to reformist or human rights groups. Leaders of unlicensed human rights groups have frequently been jailed for publicizing state abuses.

Professional syndicates are controlled by the Baath Party, and all labor unions must belong to the General Federation of Trade Unions, a nominally independent grouping that the government uses to control union activity. Strikes in nonagricultural sectors are legal, but they rarely occur.

While the lower courts in previous years operated with some independence and generally safeguarded ordinary defendants' rights, politically sensitive cases were usually tried by the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), an exceptional tribunal appointed by the executive branch that denied the right to appeal, limited access to legal counsel, tried many cases behind closed doors, and routinely accepted confessions obtained through torture. State media reported in April 2011 that the SSSC had been abolished in response to the uprising, though this did not bring any tangible gains in the rights of the accused.

The security agencies, which operate independently of the judiciary, routinely extract confessions by torturing suspects and detaining their family members. The government lifted its emergency law in April 2011, but security agencies still had virtually unlimited authority to arrest suspects and hold them incommunicado for prolonged periods without charge. Political activists are often monitored and harassed by security services even after release from prison. As of mid-December 2011, an estimated 12,000 to 40,000 people had been detained for political reasons. Extrajudicial killings also increased significantly in 2011 in the course of the

government's crackdown against popular protests.

The Kurdish minority faces severe restrictions on cultural and linguistic expression. The 2001 press law requires that owners and top editors of print publications be Arabs. Kurdish exile groups estimate that as many as 300,000 Syrian Kurds have traditionally been unable to obtain citizenship, passports, identity cards, or birth certificates, preventing them from owning land, obtaining government employment, and voting. Suspected Kurdish activists are routinely dismissed from schools and public-sector jobs. While the government pledged in April 2011 to give citizenship to thousands of Kurds in eastern Syria, conditions for Kurds remained harsh. Opposition groups claimed that the regime was behind the killing of prominent Kurdish activist Mishaal al-Tammo in October, and government forces shot and killed several Kurds at al-Tammo's funeral.

Though Syria provides relatively generous educational and medical benefits to Iraqi refugees, they face obstacles to employment and owning property. Many young Iraqi women have been forced into Syria's sex trade. The Syrian government estimated that there were about one million Iraqi refugees in Syria as of January 2011. Iraqis maintained a low profile during the 2011 uprising, but the state's violent response, international economic sanctions, and a degree of Iraqi government support for the Syrian regime left refugees in a difficult position.

Opposition figures, human rights activists, and relatives of exiled dissidents are often prevented from traveling abroad. The government did allow a longtime human rights activist to leave the country in July 2011, though it blocked another who tried to travel to Germany for cancer treatment. Amnesty International reported in October that Syrian dissidents in many foreign countries had been subjected to intimidation by Syrian embassy officials, as well as threats or real harm to their relatives in Syria. The government's crackdown, security checkpoints, and military deployments during the year severely restricted internal travel, in some cases blockading restive towns for extended periods.

While Syria was one of the first Arab countries to grant female suffrage, women remain underrepresented in Syrian politics and government. They hold 12 percent of the seats in the legislature, though the government has appointed some women to senior positions, including one of the two vice presidential posts. The government provides women with equal access to education, but many discriminatory laws remain in force. A husband may request that the Interior Ministry block his wife from traveling abroad, and women, unlike men, are generally barred from taking their children out of the country without proof of the spouse's permission. Violence against women is common, particularly in rural areas. The government imposed two-year minimum prison sentences for killings classified as "honor crimes" in 2009, and in early 2011 changed the law to mandate sentences of five to seven years. Women's rights groups estimate that there are about 200 such killings each year. Personal status law for Muslims is governed by Sharia (Islamic law) and is discriminatory in marriage, divorce, and inheritance matters. Church law governs personal status issues for Christians, in some cases barring divorce.

Ratings Change

Syria's civil liberties rating declined from 6 to 7 due to increased government efforts to divide the country along sectarian lines, the complete deterioration of the rule of law, and increased restrictions on freedom of movement.

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