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Freedom in the World - ↓ Syria (2008)

Capital:
Damascus

Population:
19,900,000

Political Rights Score: 7
Civil Liberties Score: 6
Status: Not Free

Trend Arrow

Syria received a downward trend arrow due to the authorities' suppression of opposition activities.

Overview

Syria held parliamentary and municipal elections as well as a presidential referendum in 2007, but candidate eligibility remained tightly circumscribed. New measures to monitor and control internet activity were put in place during the year. Meanwhile, prominent reformists received sentences for signing the 2006 Beirut-Damascus Declaration on Lebanese sovereignty.

The modern state of Syria was established by the French after World War I and formally granted independence in 1946. Democratic institutions functioned intermittently until the Arab Socialist Baath Party seized power in a 1963 coup and transformed Syria into a one-party state governed under emergency law. During the 1960s, power shifted within the party from civilian ideologues to army officers hailing mostly from Syria's Alawite minority (adherents of an offshoot Islamic sect comprising 12 percent of the population), culminating in General Hafez al-Assad's rise to power in 1970.

Although the regime cultivated a base of support among public-sector employees, peasants, and select private-sector beneficiaries that transcended sectarian and ethnic divisions, it fundamentally relied on Alawite domination of the military-security establishment and the suppression of dissent. In 1982, government forces stormed the northern town of Hama to crush a rebellion by the Muslim Brotherhood, one of the main opposition movements, and killed as many as 20,000 insurgents and civilians. By the time of al-Assad's death in 2000, Baathist rule and socialist economic policies had made Syria one of the Arab world's poorest countries.

Bashar al-Assad, who succeeded his late father, pledged to liberalize Syria's politics and the economy. The first six months of his tenure featured the release of political prisoners, the return of exiled dissidents, and open discussion of the country's problems. In February 2001, however, the regime abruptly halted this so-called Damascus Spring. Most leading reformists were arrested and sentenced to lengthy prison terms, while others faced constant surveillance and intimidation by the secret police. Economic reform fell by the wayside, and Syria under Bashar al-Assad proved to be less free than under his father and equally resistant to political change.

Reinvigorated by the toppling of Iraq's Baathist regime in 2003, Syria's secular and Islamist dissidents began cooperating and pushing for the release of all political prisoners, the cancellation of the state of emergency, and legalization of political parties. Syria's Kurdish minority, apparently inspired by the political empowerment of Iraqi Kurds, erupted into eight days of rioting in March 2004. At least 30 people were killed as security forces suppressed the riots and arrested some 2,000 people.

The domestic opposition was also strengthened by international frustration over Syria's failure to combat terrorist infiltration into Iraq and its continuing occupation of Lebanon. Syrian troops had entered Lebanon in 1976, during the latter country's civil war, but they had stayed on after peace was restored in 1990. In September 2004, UN Security Council Resolution 1559 called on Damascus to immediately end the occupation. Syria was widely suspected of involvement in the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri, prompting fresh international pressure for a Syrian withdrawal as well as massive anti-Syrian demonstrations in Beirut. The UN Security Council then passed Resolution 1636, calling on Syria to cooperate unconditionally with the UN investigation into Hariri's death. Syrian troops pulled out of Lebanon in April 2005, but al-Assad refused to fully cooperate with the Hariri probe. An interim report on the investigation issued in 2005 cited circumstantial evidence implicating members of al-Assad's regime.

In the face of growing internal opposition, the government released hundreds of political prisoners in 2005. Despite repeated hints that sweeping political reforms would be drafted at a major Baath Party conference that year, no substantial measures were undertaken, and al-Assad openly ruled out any major constitutional reforms or loosening of Baath Party control. In October 2005, representatives of all three opposition currents—the Islamists, the Kurds, and secular liberals—signed the Damascus Declaration for Democratic and National Change, which called for the country's leaders to step down and endorsed a broad set of liberal democratic principles.

A major cabinet shuffle in February 2006 introduced 14 new ministers and replaced the foreign, interior, and information ministers. In May, exiled opposition leaders announced the creation of the National Salvation Front (NSF) to bring about regime change. Also that month, 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 of the signatories were subsequently detained or sentenced to prison, part of a renewed government crackdown on dissidents in 2006 that reversed the previous partial leniency on personal freedom. A Syrian military court that year charged former vice president Abdel Halim Khaddam, a leader of the NSF, in absentia with inciting foreign attacks against Syria.

The president in January 2007 decreed a series of largely cosmetic electoral reforms ahead of the April parliamentary elections, a May presidential referendum, and August municipal elections. Al-Assad obtained approval for another term as president with 97.6 percent of the vote. In results that were preordained by the electoral framework, the ruling Baath-dominated coalition won the majority of seats in the parliamentary and municipal polls. Opposition groups boycotted the elections and announced plans for new laws on elections and political parties. Meanwhile, the National Council of the Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change renewed its activities in 2007, prompting a government crackdown on its

members.

Like its neighbors, Syria is struggling with an influx of Iraqi refugees; in 2007, the Syrian Foreign Ministry sought to stem the flow by requiring Iraqis to obtain visas before entering. Syria still stands accused of lax border monitoring, allowing militants to enter Iraq to conduct attacks. The Syrian regime is also suspected of involvement in the recent assassinations of several anti-Syrian Lebanese lawmakers.

On September 6, 2007, Israeli forces conducted an air strike against a rumored nuclear facility in Syria. The event was clouded by suspicious charges and incomplete information and made any future Syrian-Israeli peace talks more difficult. Nevertheless, Syria did participate in the U.S.-sponsored Annapolis Conference on the Arab-Israeli issue in November 2007.

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-member, unicameral People's Council, which serves for four-year terms and holds 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 aligned to the regime, are permitted to contest about a third of the People's Council seats, meaning two-thirds are reserved for the NPF. The ruling party pledged to legalize political parties not based on religious or ethnic identity (a condition that would exclude the Muslim Brotherhood and Kurdish opposition groups) at its June 2005 conference, but no legislation implementing this pledge has been forthcoming.

Changes made to the electoral process in 2007 include limits on campaign spending, transparent election boxes, and the monitoring of polling stations by civil servants. Syrian political reformers have criticized these measures as wholly insufficient.

Regime officials and their families monopolize many lucrative import markets and benefit from a range of illicit economic activities. Corruption is widespread, and bribery is often necessary to navigate the bureaucracy. Equality of opportunity has been compromised by rampant graft. Syria was ranked 138 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of expression is heavily restricted. Vaguely worded articles of the penal code, the Emergency Law, and a 2001 Publications Law criminalize the publication of material that harms national unity, tarnishes the image of the state, or threatens the "goals of the revolution." Many journalists, writers, and intellectuals have been arrested under these statutes. Apart from a handful of non-news radio stations, all broadcast media are state-owned. However, satellite dishes are common, giving many Syrians access to foreign broadcasts. While more than a dozen privately owned newspapers and magazines have sprouted up in recent years, only one (owned by the son of Syria's defense minister) is allowed to publish serious criticism of the government. 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. Since the Kurdish protests in 2004, the government has cracked down on journalists calling for the expansion of Kurdish rights.

In July 2007, the authorities issued a stop press order for two months against the *Baladuna* newspaper—managed by Majd Sulaiman, the son of a former official—after it published a cartoon commenting on the president. Separately, the Western-based Reform Party of Syria hung hundreds of posters of its exiled leader, Farid Ghadry, in the streets of major cities in August 2007. The posters were quickly removed, but the act garnered much attention.

Syrians are permitted to access the internet only through state-run servers, which block access to Kurdish, opposition, foreign-based, and other websites. Previously available networking sites such as Facebook were blocked in 2007. E-mail correspondence is reportedly monitored by the intelligence agencies, which often require internet cafe owners to spy on customers. The Ministry of Telecommunications introduced new measures in 2007 that call for all posters for blogs and websites to publish their names and e-mail addresses. In September 2007, blogger Ali Zine al-Abidine Mejan was convicted of “writings unauthorized by the government that harm ties with a foreign state” and sentenced to two years in prison. Karim Arbaji was detained in June for moderating akhawia.net, a youth internet forum. Another blogger, Tarek Biasi, was arrested by military intelligence that month for insulting the security services online.

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, all nonworship meetings of religious groups require permits, and religious fundraising is closely scrutinized. The Alawite minority dominates the officer corps of the military and security forces. The government tightly monitors mosques and controls the appointment of Muslim clergy.

Academic freedom is heavily restricted, although progress has been made on privatizing higher education. University professors have been dismissed or imprisoned for expressing dissent. In June 2007, seven students received seven-year prison sentences for attempting to establish a youth discussion group and publishing prodemocracy articles.

Freedom of assembly is heavily 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 in 2006, forbidding any group of five or more people from discussing political and economic topics. This rule has been enforced through surveillance and informant reports.

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. Three prominent human rights activists—Michel Kilo, Mahmoud Issa, and Anwar al-Bunni—were arrested in 2006 for signing the Beirut-Damascus Declaration. Kilo and al-Bunni were sentenced in April 2007 to five years in prison.

Several members of the National Council of the Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change, including Ahmad Tohme, Jabr al-Shoufi, Akram al-Bunni, Fida al-Hurani, and Ali al-Abdullah, were arrested without charge following their first conference in December 2007, at which they elected their president and secretariat.

Professional syndicates are controlled by the Baath Party, and all labor unions must belong to the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU), 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 operate with some independence and generally safeguard defendants' rights, politically sensitive cases are usually tried by the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), an exceptional tribunal established under emergency law that denies the right to appeal, limits access to legal counsel, tries many cases behind closed doors, and routinely accepts confessions obtained through torture. The appointment of SSSC judges is in the hands of the executive, and only the president and interior minister may alter verdicts.

The state of emergency in force since 1963 gives the security agencies virtually unlimited authority to arrest suspects and hold them incommunicado for prolonged periods without charge. Many of the estimated 2,500 to 3,000 remaining political prisoners in Syria have never been tried. The security agencies, which operate independently of the judiciary, routinely extract confessions by torturing suspects and detaining their family members. There were scores of credible reports of torture in 2007. After release from prison, political activists are routinely monitored and harassed by security services. The Syrian Human Rights Committee has reported that hundreds of government informants are rewarded for or coerced into writing reports on relatives, friends, and associates who are suspected of involvement in "antiregime" activities.

The Kurdish minority faces severe restrictions on cultural and linguistic expression. The 2001 press law requires that owners and top editors of publications be Arabs. Some 200,000 Syrian Kurds are deprived of citizenship and unable to obtain passports, identity cards, or birth certificates, which in turn prevents them from owning land, obtaining government employment, and voting. Suspected Kurdish activists are routinely dismissed from schools and public-sector jobs. Mustapha Khalil, a member of the Kurdish intellectual movement, and two other young Kurdish men were arrested in 2007 for engaging in cultural activities. Muhi al-Din Sheikh Aali, secretary of the Kurdish Democratic Unity Party, was released in February after being held incommunicado since December 2006. However, former lawmaker Osman Suleiman bin Haji and Kurdish activist Aisha Afandi Bint Ahmed were arrested in November 2007 for undisclosed reasons. Security services also used force to suppress a peaceful demonstration organized by the Kurdish Democratic Party (PYD) in November 2007 to protest Turkish incursions into northern Iraq. One man was killed, dozens were wounded, and PYD activists were arrested. The government continues to detain dozens of Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) members. It has arrested hundreds of other Kurdish activists in recent years and prevented many from traveling to Iraqi Kurdistan.

Opposition figures and relatives of exiled dissidents are routinely prevented from traveling abroad, and stateless Kurds lack the requisite documents to leave the country. In 2006, the government expanded its travel-ban list to include signers of

the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, former Damascus Spring detainees, human rights lawyers, and their family members. In May 2007, activist Kamal Labwani, founder of the Democratic Liberal Gathering, was sentenced to 12 years in prison for "contacting a foreign country and encouraging attacks on Syria" after he returned from a visit to the United States. Opposition member Jihadedin al-Musuti was arrested in the Damascus airport in November 2007 as he was leaving for a human rights meeting in Cairo. Aside from travel bans on political dissidents, Syrians are generally allowed freedom of movement, residence, and employment.

The government has promoted gender equality by appointing women to senior positions and providing 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 are generally barred from leaving the country with their children without proof of the father's permission. Violence against women is common, particularly in rural areas. An accused rapist can be acquitted if he marries his victim, and the law provides for reduced sentences in cases of "honor crimes" committed by men against female relatives for alleged sexual misconduct. Syrian human rights groups estimate that over 300 women were killed in honor crimes in 2006. Personal status law for Muslim women is governed by Sharia (Islamic law) and is discriminatory in marriage, divorce, and inheritance matters.