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Freedom in the World 2011 - Syria

Capital: Damascus

Population: 21,906,000

Political Rights Score: 7 *

Civil Liberties Score: 6 *

Status: Not Free

Overview

While Syria's first lady promoted the development of civil society activity in apolitical fields in 2010, the authorities continued to impose harsh restrictions on fundamental human rights. Those subjected to monitoring, intimidation, and imprisonment during the year included journalists, dissident writers, suspected Islamists, Kurdish activists, and gay men.

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 belonged to Syria's Alawite minority (adherents of an 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 suppression of dissent. In 1982, government forces stormed the northern 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. In February 2001, however, 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 a U.S.-led invasion in 2003, Syria's secular and Islamist dissidents began cooperating and pushing for the release of political prisoners, the cancellation of the state of emergency, and the legalization of

opposition parties. Syria's Kurdish minority erupted into eight days of rioting in March 2004. At least 30 people were killed as security forces suppressed the riots and made some 2,000 arrests.

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 – the Islamists, the 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, 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 as part of a renewed crackdown on personal freedoms.

In 2007, al-Assad won another term as president with 97.6 percent of the vote. In results that were similarly preordained by the electoral framework, 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.

The NSF fell apart in 2009, largely because the Muslim Brotherhood, in deference to the Syrian government's support for the Palestinian militant group Hamas, suspended its opposition activities in the aftermath of Israel's offensive in the Gaza Strip that January. In 2010, the state continued to use its internal security apparatus to suppress dissenting views and punish government opponents.

In 2010, the international community pursued limited engagement with Damascus. The United States lifted its travel warning to Syria for American citizens, eased visa requirements for Syrians looking to travel to the United States, allowed Boeing to sell parts to Syria's national airline to upgrade its commercial fleet, and nominated an ambassador to Damascus. European business leaders, eager to enter the rapidly expanding Syrian economy, began courting their Syrian counterparts. Syrian human rights and opposition leaders criticized the international community for ignoring internal oppression in Syria in order to pursue regional objectives. Much of the détente came to an end, however, when the United States and Israel accused Syria of shipping arms to Hezbollah in April, and President Barack Obama renewed sanctions on Syria in May.

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.

Regime officials and their families benefit from a range of illicit economic activities. Syria is slowly opening itself economically by removing heavy tariffs and eliminating subsidies, but these limited reforms benefit a small minority at the expense of average citizens. Corruption is widespread, and bribery is often necessary to navigate the bureaucracy. Those arrested on corruption charges rarely face serious punishment. A

general responsible for enforcing customs regulations was arrested in 2009 on charges of extensive graft, but he had not faced trial by the end of 2010. Syria was ranked 127 out of 178 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2010 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 laws. Apart from a handful of 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, and criticism of government policy is tolerated, provided it is nuanced and does not criticize the president. 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 of 2004, the government has cracked down on journalists calling for the expansion of Kurdish or regional rights.

Two journalists from the Saudi-owned Rotana satellite television channel were arrested in early January 2010, though they were released in February and charges were never brought against them. Former political prisoner Ragheda Sa'id Hasan was detained in February in connection with a manuscript she had written on her experience. In June, authorities arrested a blogger who wrote on a popular independent site for Syrian news and analysis. Reporters Without Borders found that at least five journalists and online dissidents remained in extended detention in Syria as of that month.

Syrians access the internet only through state-run servers, which block more than 160 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 such as Facebook and YouTube are also blocked. E-mail correspondence is reportedly monitored by intelligence agencies, which often require internet cafe owners to monitor customers. In practice, internet users can find ways around these restrictions, and poor connections and high costs tend to hinder access more effectively than government censorship. The government has also been successful in fostering self-censorship through intimidation.

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. The Alawite minority dominates the officer corps of the security forces. The government continued its periodic campaign against religious extremism in 2010, outlawing the niqab (facial veil) in Syrian universities and transferring more than 2,000 schoolteachers who wore the garment to administrative positions.

Academic freedom is heavily restricted. Several private universities have recently been founded, and the extent of academic freedom within them varies. University professors have been dismissed or imprisoned for expressing dissent.

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 in 2006, forbidding any group of five or more people from discussing political and economic topics. This rule has been enforced through surveillance and reports by extensive informant networks. Such activity by the intelligence services has ensured that a culture of self-censorship and fear prevails, and ordinary Syrians are unwilling to discuss politics under most circumstances.

Freedom of association is severely restricted. All nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must register with the government, which generally denies registration to reformist or human rights groups. In 2010, First Lady Asma al-Assad led a drive to increase Syrians' participation in civil society, and announced that regulations on NGO registration and governance would be simplified. In practice, however, only state-friendly NGOs working on apolitical issues like rural development, social welfare, the environment, and entrepreneurship benefited from this limited opening. Leaders of unlicensed human rights groups have frequently been jailed for publicizing state abuses. Two leaders of an unlicensed Kurdish human rights organization were arrested in March.

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 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. SSSC judges are appointed by the executive branch, and only the president and interior minister may alter verdicts. The SSSC suspended its operations in late 2008 following riots in Syria's largest prison for political detainees, but reopened its docket in 2009. In June 2010, Muhannad al-Hassani, a human rights lawyer and longtime critic of the courts, was sentenced to three years in prison for "weakening the national sentiment."

The security agencies, which operate independently of the judiciary, routinely extract confessions by torturing suspects and detaining their family members. The state of emergency in force since 1963 gives 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 political prisoners in Syria have never been tried. The majority are believed to be Islamists; those suspected of involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood or radical Islamist groups are regularly detained by the authorities. Political activists are often monitored and harassed by security services even after release from prison.

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 are deprived of citizenship and are 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. In 2009, the government made it more difficult to hire noncitizens, resulting in the dismissal of many Kurds. At least one person was killed in clashes between Kurds and security forces at a March 2010 celebration of the Kurdish New Year.

Though Syria provides relatively generous educational and medical benefits to Iraqi refugees, they face obstacles to employment and owning property. The Syrian government in 2010 reported that there were 1.5 million Iraqi refugees in Syria, and called on the Iraqi government to provide more support. The Iraqi government countered that only 206,000 Iraqis remained in Syria. Many young Iraqi women have been forced into the country's sex trade.

Opposition figures, human rights activists, and relatives of exiled dissidents are often prevented from traveling abroad. The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression estimated in 2010 that more than 400 Syrians were barred from traveling because of their political activities. Many ordinary Kurds lack the requisite documents to leave the country. Other Syrians are generally allowed greater freedom of movement, residence, and employment.

Women are underrepresented in politics and government, with 12.4 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; previously there had been a maximum one-year sentence. State-run media estimate that there are 40 such killings each year, whereas women's rights groups put the figure at 200. 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.

The authorities appeared to crack down on homosexuals in 2010. While gay activity at private parties and in certain areas was previously tolerated, the police had arrested at least 25 gay men by July, citing security concerns. Those detained were reportedly unwilling to speak out, due in part to the threat of family and societal hostility.

** Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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