

SYRIA'S POLITICAL STRUGGLE: SPRING 2012

With terrorist attacks on the rise following a mid-May spate of bombings in Damascus and the May 25 massacre in Houla, the growing militarization of the Syrian uprising has dominated international discussions of the conflict. Not only is the situation beginning to resemble a sectarian struggle, but it seems that Syria is well on its way to a protracted civil war. As the violence worsens, less attention has been paid to political dynamics. Yet the political situation in Syria has evolved, with several important developments in the last two months. President Bashar al-Assad's regime held parliamentary elections in early May in an effort to create a narrative of democratic transition and to offer fence-sitters the belief that peaceful reform was possible. The elections, though spurious, were part of a propaganda campaign that has so far allowed Assad's government to maintain a façade of normalcy in the face of the uprising.

Meanwhile, the national opposition coalition Syrian National Council (SNC) has struggled with its attempts to maintain unity and legitimacy, while promoting its own democratic narrative. The re-election of the SNC president was an important test, and the challenges and internal dissent that emerged from that process have threatened to unravel the council. In the meantime, the protest movement within Syria has continued forward without the SNC's help. Grassroots activists have sought to create meaningful political structures by forming smaller, more localized organizations that coordinate together to achieve the shared objective of Assad's removal. With the disintegration of the SNC more likely than ever and the emergence of other groups looking to replace it, the next few months will pose an important moment for the opposition.

This paper examines Syria's recent parliamentary elections in an attempt to understand why they were important to the government and how they affected Syrians who have not yet sided with the regime or the opposition. It also looks at how recent events in Aleppo and Damascus, two important centers of regime support, undermined the positive effects of the elections. The second portion discusses developments within the political opposition. It explores recent threats to the Syrian National Council, discusses the council's struggles with its own democratic deficiencies, and reviews the significance of similar attempts to hold elections within the SNC. The paper concludes by analyzing the development of the protest movement and positing a political framework for the opposition that offers greater potential for the ultimate success of the revolution.

SYRIA'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

The Syrian government held parliamentary elections on May 7, 2012 amidst a backdrop of intense regime repression and an increasingly militant opposition. The elections were technically Syria's first multiparty vote since 1963. Syria approved a new constitution in February 2012 during a referendum held in an attempt to assuage revolutionary demands. This new Syrian Constitution grants individuals the right to establish new political parties provided that they apply for licensing from the Interior Ministry first, entailing the state's direct intervention in approving the new parties.¹ Thus, while candidates that were not members of Assad's Baath party were allowed to run, only government-approved political parties were able to field candidates. A total of eleven new parties participated in the elections, along with ten parties of the National Progressive Front headed by the Baath party, as well as a number of independents.² Overall, 7,195 candidates from twenty-one parties competed for the 250 seats in the parliamentary elections.³ The Assad regime sought to portray the vote as a major triumph, heralding a series of comprehensive constitutional and political transformations that led Syria toward democratic transition and the creation of a new pluralistic government. Images on the government-run Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) home page showed Syrians eagerly voting at polling stations and extolling the importance of casting a ballot in interviews conducted on the street. In each case, SANA described the election as an important part of the government's plan for political reform, with the newly-elected Parliament leading to an expanded national partnership government and an environment of political plurality.

PRO-GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS & LOYAL OPPOSITION ORGANIZATIONS



ARAB SOCIALIST BAAH PARTY

The Arab Socialist Baath Party is Syria's current governing party. The Baath party was founded in 1947 by Michel Aflaq, Salah al-Din al-Bitar, and Zaki al-Arsuki. It is a regional party and has operated in many Arab countries, including Lebanon and Iraq. The Baath party has ruled Syria since 1963 and was constitutionally enshrined as the leader of state and society in the Syrian Constitution of 1973. In Syria, the Baath party has turned into a patronage network closely intertwined with the government, and is virtually indistinguishable from the state.



NATIONAL PROGRESSIVE FRONT

The National Progressive Front is a coalition of ten political parties in Syria that support the socialist and Arab nationalist orientation of the current government and accept the leading role of the Arab Socialist Baath Party. The Front was established in 1972 by former president Hafiz al-Assad to provide for a limited degree of political participation. However, it is entirely controlled by the Baath party.



THE SYRIAN SOCIAL NATIONAL PARTY (SSNP)

The Syrian Social National Party is a secular, nationalist political party. It was originally founded in 1932 by Antun Saadeh as a national liberation organization against French colonialism. The party became a major political force in the early 1950s, but was thoroughly repressed in 1955. In 2005 the party was reorganized, legalized, and joined the National Progressive Front. The party is currently led by Ali Haidar, and it joined with the National Committee for the Unity of Syrian Communists to form the Popular Front for Change and Liberation in August 2011. It is the largest political group in Syria after the Baath party with over 100,000 members.



POPULAR FRONT FOR CHANGE AND LIBERATION (AL-JABHA AL-SHAABIA LIL-TAGHYER WAL-TAHRIR)

The Popular Front for Change and Liberation (PFCL) was founded in August 2011 by the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) and the National Committee for the Unity of Syrian Communists. The SSNP is led by Ali Haidar and is well-known for being pro-Assad, despite its historical enmity with the Baath party. The National Committee for the Unity of Syrian Communists is led by Qadri Jamil, who has strong regime connections; his party is closely aligned with the National Progressive Front. The party was officially registered following the February 2012 referendum and both Heidar and Jamil won seats in the May 2012 parliamentary elections. They are considered among the "loyal opposition".

In reality, the elections were severely flawed. Every major opposition body boycotted the elections, with the SNC describing them as a "sham" and a "farce which can be added to the regime's masquerade."⁴ A number of government-approved political parties, including the Syria Homeland Party and the Al-Ansar Party, also boycotted in the face of several disadvantages.⁵ Secretary General of the Syria Homeland Party Majd Niazi complained that the 90-day window between their February 2012 registration and the parliamentary election was insufficient to properly develop the institutional capacity needed to campaign.⁶ Moreover, they were competing against the incumbent Baath party, which has the advantage of a massive membership base of approximately 2.8 million voters and control over state institutions and funds.⁷ Al-Ansar Party leader Ammar al-Rifai said his party had "no chance at equal opportunities" and that "the Baath party exploits the regime's facilities and the state's resources in the electoral process."⁸

Even parties that participated in the election complained that the process was unfair. Syrian Social National Party (SSNP) member Mohammad Zahweh echoed complaints about the Baath party's dominance, suggesting that new political parties had little chance to compete with the "built-in advantages

of the Baath party."⁹ Moreover, despite actually winning a seat in the new parliament, Popular Front for Change and Liberation (PFCL) leader Qadri Jamil complained of breaches by pro-government elements leading up to the vote. He openly questioned the transparency and integrity of the elections and indicated that he may give up his seat pending the government's response to complaints.

Poor security and low voter turnout also marred the elections. Government forces and Assad supporters clashed with demonstrators protesting the elections. Security forces used bulldozers to break up strikes and sit-ins in Hama province, while pro-government *shabiha* militia tried to force civilians to vote in Dera'a. In rural areas outside of direct government control, election centers were reportedly set up at the border crossings and checkpoints to enable government surveillance of election activity. According to representatives of the Local Coordination Committee of Syria, reports of violence kept many Syrians from the polling stations, particularly in Yadouda where security forces fired on citizens protesting the election.¹⁰ Khalaf al-Azzawi, the chairman of the Higher Committee for Elections (HCE), announced that overall participation among eligible voters was 51.26 percent.¹¹ However, some areas reported much

NEW PARTIES FORMED SINCE FEBRUARY 2012

SYRIA HOMETLAND PARTY



The Syria Homeland Party was registered with the government in March 2012 and is headquartered in Damascus, in the area of Shabandar. It was created by Majd Niazi who serves as the party's Secretary General. The party's website states that the objective of the party is to ensure the honor of the homeland and its people. Its founding principles are listed as maintaining the unity of Syria and respecting a united nation, the achievement of human rights, and freedom for all citizens. The party boycotted the recent parliamentary elections.

SYRIAN NATIONAL YOUTH PARTY



The Syrian National Youth Party was registered with the government in March 2012 and is currently headed by Maher Merhej. It describes itself as neither pro-government nor pro-opposition, though its website states that the party functions under the umbrella of President Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian homeland. The party fielded three candidates in the May 2012 parliamentary elections.

SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC PARTY



The Syrian Democratic Party was registered with the government in February 2012. The party is headquartered in al-Raqqa, with an office in Damascus. The party's website states that its primary objectives are reform, justice, and democracy. The Syrian Democratic Party was the only newly-established party to win a seat in the May 2012 parliamentary elections, with the seat going to a party member Ahmad Koussa in the Aleppo district.

AL-ANSAR PARTY



The Al-Ansar Party was established in early January 2012, and later registered with the government following the February 2012 referendum. It is headed by Ammar al-Rifai and party headquarters are located in Damascus. The party boycotted the May 2012 parliamentary elections, and refused to accept the official election results. It has since called for new elections based on a system of proportional representation that would treat the entire country as a single constituency, and with quotas allocated for political parties, women, and youth.

lower figures, including Harasta and the regime stronghold of Latakia, where voter participation was as low as fourteen percent. Meanwhile, the regime claimed that voter turnout was highest in the embattled city of Homs, with 64 percent voter participation.¹² These statistics are unlikely given the areas' demographics and have been disputed by activists. They argued that polling stations were not even set up in cities and areas with a strong opposition presence, particularly in Homs, undermining the credibility of such figures. It is not possible to verify the results independently as no international or domestic monitors were present.

There were also widespread allegations of voter fraud, corruption, and bribery. In a scathing statement made shortly after the elections took place, Jamil, PFCL leader, announced that the vote had been "forged and manipulated."¹³ He warned that he may suspend his parliamentary activities due to concerns over "irregularities" in the electoral process. Syrian National Youth party leader Maher Merhej made the same accusation, saying, "The elections were not clean but marred by many irregularities, from forgery to the registration of imaginary names."¹⁴ Merhej also said his party did not accept the official election results and did not consider the incoming People's Assembly to be representative of the Syrian people.

The results of the election were officially released on May 15. Prior to releasing the results, the HCE ordered recounts

in a number of districts after receiving complaints over irregularities. While the recounts delayed the release of election results, they did not change them. Thus, Syria's first multiparty election only served to reaffirm the Baath party's stranglehold on power with Assad supporters making up more than 90 percent of the new parliament. The National Progressive Front, which is dominated by the Syrian Baath Party and Assad loyalists, won more than 150 of the 250 seats. The remainder of the seats went to wealthy independents, many of whom aligned with the Baath Party despite being listed as independents. Moreover, the newly-established parties won only one seat, which went to Ahmad Koussa from the Syrian Democratic Party in Aleppo.¹⁵ The election results demonstrate that Baathists remain in charge in Syria. Referring to Article 8 of the previous constitution, which enshrined the Baath party as "leader of state and society," one anonymous senior Baath party official stated that, "The Baath party ruled between 1963 and 1973 without the need for Article 8, and [without Article 8] it is still ruling today."¹⁶

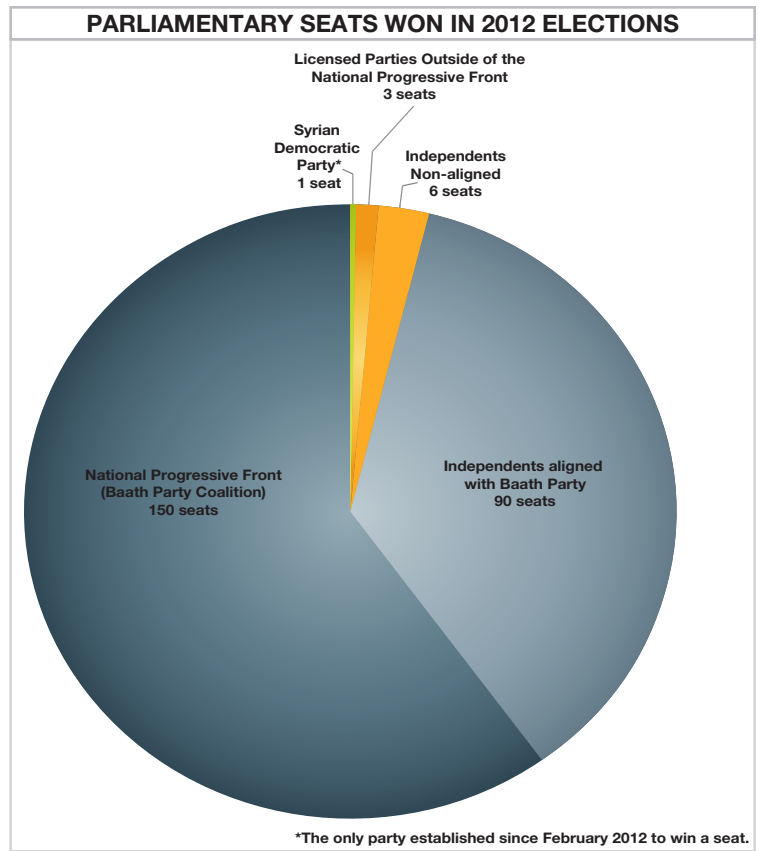
The Baath party retains a large membership and abundant resources, making its presence formidable regardless of steps to enhance political plurality by abdicating its constitutionally-enshrined privileges. Syrian activist Shakeeb al-Jabri, claiming that the elections were rigged, revealed the predictability of the elections when he posted a list on Facebook a day before the election that alleged to show the

already-chosen victorious candidates in Damascus.¹⁷ His list proved almost entirely accurate, with only two exceptions out of more than 25 candidates. Regardless of whether the vote was in fact rigged, it shows that the context in which the elections took place made the results foreseeable. The Baath Party maintains the deepest political networks within Syria and is the only political group with considerable political experience. The candidates running for office included none of Syria's influential community leaders and activists, who were too afraid to run, nor did it include any members of the established Syrian opposition. Moreover, Islamic figures, like the Muslim Brotherhood, were constitutionally barred from competing. Given this political environment, the results were expected—and this contributed to the opposition's claims that these elections were meaningless.

Even though the elections were not free or fair by any international standards, they were an important propaganda victory for the regime. The regime sought to promote a sense of normalcy that downplayed the crisis and encouraged perceptions of its continued power. This thin promise of “normalcy” is essential for the Assad regime's survival. Many Syrians fear the outbreak of sectarian conflict, devastating international intervention, Muslim Brotherhood influence, or a terrorist presence, so they have not sided with the regime or the opposition. They have chosen neutrality instead, hoping to weather the crisis. For these Syrians, the elections offered the illusion of hope and a chance for peaceful reform. The elections helped siphon off support from the opposition by offering the possibility of gradual reform without bloodshed.

The elections were also an important victory for the significant portion of the population that continues to support Assad. Prior to election day, thousands of demonstrators turned out in Damascus to show their support for Assad. The slogans the demonstrators chanted included “God, Syria and Bashar – that's all” and “No to the revolution, No to foreign intervention.”¹⁸ For these Syrians, the elections reflected the government's sincere attempt to reform in the face of what they term is a conspiracy hatched against Syria “by religious and foreign enemies.”¹⁹ Moreover, the elections offer regime supporters the opportunity to reap even greater benefits through access to state resources and governmental privileges.

The parliamentary elections also allowed Syria's allies to continue to support the regime. Russia, China and Iran applauded the elections as an important step towards a solution to the conflict. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov hailed the elections as the “best path for ending the protracted political crisis.”²⁰ Russia has twice blocked United Nations Security Council resolutions that called for



strong action against President Assad. Regime efforts such as the February referendum and the May parliamentary elections have helped to justify Russian resistance to international action in Syria, strengthening the argument that the international community should allow the Syrian government and opposition to develop an internal political solution.²¹ China also praised the elections, issuing a statement that claimed the elections were “part of the Syrian people's request for reform.”²² Iran went so far as to criticize the Syrian opposition for its boycott of the elections, putting the blame on the opposition for the continued crisis. “These groups should engage in a correct process so that reform can be realized,” stated foreign ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast. He argued that the opposition was only after the “blood of the regime” and was “not committed to real democratic reform.”²³ In this way, the May elections helped shift the blame to the opposition: Assad is meeting international demands for political change, and the opposition undermines these reforms. This narrative is pivotal in justifying Russia and China's argument against stronger international action.

So far the Assad regime has successfully assumed an image of invulnerability. Most citizens living in Syria's two largest cities, Damascus and Aleppo, have been able to go about their daily business without confronting the violent realities of the uprising. But despite the façade of normalcy the Assad

regime has projected, there are signs that the uprising is gaining momentum even in these areas.

PROTESTS SPREAD

Recent developments in Aleppo demonstrate the reason that the parliamentary elections were so important for the Syrian government. Just days prior to the election security forces raided Aleppo University and forced its closure in an escalated crackdown on antigovernment opposition. The sudden crackdown was seen across the nation as a potential turning point for the city of Aleppo. In this important commercial center, business interests and large minority populations have kept most residents largely on the side of the regime—or at least unwilling to join the opposition. As a result, Aleppo had witnessed lower levels of violence than most other areas of the country since the beginning of the uprising. But following the university's closure, wide-scale demonstrations were held across Aleppo, leaving opposition members to believe the city might finally join the uprising.

However, the parliamentary elections effectively calmed the city at the time. Mass protests in the city center largely died out following the elections, though some limited demonstrations continued at the university. UN observers who visited the city on May 11 reported that conditions in the city seemed positive, violence was low, and “life was fairly normal.”²⁴ “Everyone is waiting to see what happens with the elections. Most people are hoping that they will be enough to make the revolution go away. We all want business as usual,” commented one Aleppian who identified himself as neither pro-government nor pro-opposition.²⁵ The elections offered fence-sitters the illusion of hope that the regime would be capable of enacting democratic reform and presented a peaceful solution to the conflict.

Yet the Assad regime squandered the benefits gained in the elections when it fired on protestors during a recent demonstration in Aleppo. On May 18, tens of thousands of protestors, including some government loyalists, participated in a demonstration named “Heroes of Aleppo University” that was held in honor of the raid on Aleppo University.²⁶ It was Aleppo's largest demonstration to date, and pointed to rising anti-regime sentiment in the city.²⁷ During the demonstration, Syrian security forces fired tear gas and live ammunition in attempts to disperse the rally, and they beat student protestors in full view of UN cease-fire monitors. The unusually violent incident led to increasing protests in Aleppo.²⁸ “That's it, Aleppo has risen,” said Abu Muhammad, an activist in nearby Idlib province.²⁹ The spread of protests in Aleppo poses a new risk for Assad's government because the city has remained a core of support

throughout the uprising. A change of sentiment in Aleppo could spread to other regime strongholds.

This change is already happening in Damascus. On May 28, Sunni merchants closed businesses in Old Damascus in the biggest act of civil disobedience by the capital's merchant class. As of early June, more than 70 percent of businesses in Damascus' main market remained closed, affecting districts across the capital.³⁰ This significant act of civil disobedience has compounded the dire economic situation and contributed to growing unrest in the capital. Sunni merchants from established commercial families have traditionally been tied to Assad's government through an intricate network of alliances and commercial agreements. They have typically endorsed Assad's regime and continued to support him throughout the uprising. However, the May 28 general strike signified a withdrawal of support and suggests that the business class may be shifting sides. “The merchants are a crucial power center. ... They hire masses of people and are the core of the silent majority. If they no longer remain silent, then the revolt has hit a milestone,” said Amer Momen, an activist operating in Damascus.³¹ This shift would be a crucial blow to the Assad regime, signaling the collapse of an important pillar of support for the government. It is unlikely that Assad will be able to establish effective control over the country without the support of these business networks.

GHALIOUN'S (RE) ELECTION

As the Assad regime has struggled to maintain its base of support, the opposition has also sought to portray its democratic principles by emphasizing the importance of holding elections. While Assad's regime successfully used the parliamentary elections to reinforce its propaganda campaign, the SNC's similar attempt was less effective. Recent presidential elections within the SNC undermined its message, revealing the organization's struggle with its own democratic deficiencies. During an important March 28 meeting in Istanbul, SNC leaders promised to re-draft the council's charter and initiate a comprehensive restructuring of the organization. At the time, many influential members of the SNC threatened to resign from the council due to complaints that the council was becoming less democratic and lacked transparency. These members, including the well-known senior dissident Haitham Maleh, are particularly important because they maintain ties to activists on the ground through which they offer the SNC a level of popular support. “I want to see the council act democratically. Until now, they are acting like the Baath party,” said Maleh, who walked out of the March meeting after SNC leader Burhan Ghalioun made a pitch for greater unity.³² Representatives of Syria's Kurds followed suit, as did a number of other activists.

EVENTS IN ALEPPO - MAY 2012

MAY 3	Security Forces raided Aleppo University and closed school. Four students were killed during the raid.
MAY 4	Demonstrations were held to protest killing of Aleppo University students.
MAY 7	Parliamentary elections were held.
MAY 11	An explosion in Aleppo targeted Baath Party headquarters.
MAY 17	Aleppo University students held rally at the university. Security forces fired tear gas and live ammunition to disperse demonstrators.
MAY 18	More than 10,000 people participated in the largest demonstration in Aleppo since the uprising began. Country-wide Friday protests are named "Heroes of Aleppo University."
MAY 25	Large demonstrations were held throughout Aleppo for the second-consecutive Friday, prompting a violent crackdown by Syrian forces. Army tanks were deployed to Aleppo for the first time.

More SNC members were dismayed at the growing influence of the Muslim Brotherhood on the group's decisions and leadership, which has increasingly sidelined secular, liberal, and nationalist voices within council. Teetering on the brink of failure, SNC leaders accepted calls for reform and promised to expand its democratic framework.

As of May 2012, more than a month after the meeting, attempts to restructure the council have failed. In an effort to help unify the Syrian opposition, the Arab League invited various opposition groups to Cairo in mid-May to hammer out their differences and reach a consensus on a vision and political agenda. However, the initiative collapsed when the SNC decided not to participate, arguing that it was the sole representative of the Syrian opposition and refusing to work with the other groups. Instead SNC leaders met privately in Rome for a council presidential election. This was the council's third such election as the organization's charter stipulates a short three-month presidential term. Holding frequent elections was meant as a measure to ensure the democratic nature of the organization and provide for a leadership that reflects shifting events on the ground. However, Ghalioun was again re-elected as SNC president on May 15, extending his presidency for another three-month period and eschewing the practice of rotation that the short presidential term was meant to promote.

News of the election results met with widespread rancor. Some council members reportedly announced that they now had two presidents to get rid of—Assad and Ghalioun.³³ Many more opposition activists throughout Syria lambasted the SNC elections as a farce, and others pointed to its results as a sign of the council's undemocratic nature. This criticism is due to the fact that only members of the General Directorate, the SNC's leadership body, were allowed to vote, with members of the General Assembly unable to participate. By limiting the vote to the 50-member General Directorate, the Muslim Brotherhood was able to influence the outcome of the election as it is the most cohesive political unit within the leadership body.

Following the extension of Ghalioun's presidency, representatives of the grassroots protest movement known

as the Local Coordination Committee (LCC) threatened to officially leave the SNC, posing the most serious challenge to the council's legitimacy since its establishment in late 2011. The key activist network operating on the ground in Syria announced that it had not been participating in council activities for over two months and released a scathing statement that criticized the SNC's structure, saying that it "lacked consensus," was rife with "apparent political deficits," and was not serious "in dealing with dire issues."³⁴ It also claimed that the SNC had forgone its democratic principles and "marginalized the demands of the revolutionaries in Syria, reflecting its distance from directions towards a civil state, democracy, transparency, and the transfer of power desired in a new Syria."³⁵ This statement not only expressed the views of groups represented by the LCC, but it also reflected popular sentiment inside Syria that the SNC is out of touch with the Syrian people and only interested in obtaining power.

On the same day the LCC issued its statement, Ghalioun announced his intention to resign. "I announce my resignation as soon as a new candidate is picked, either by consensus or new elections," he said.³⁶ His resignation revealed how dependent the SNC is on maintaining political capital among the grassroots protest movement. Two challenges now facing the SNC are to ensure a smooth transition to a new president and to demonstrate its democratic principles.

Many members of the SNC believed that runner-up George Sabra, a veteran activist and liberal Christian, would be appointed to the post immediately following Ghalioun's announcement.³⁷ However, the 12-member Executive Committee, the top decision-making body of the council, met in Istanbul on May 23 and decided that the SNC would convene the General Secretariat in the Turkish capital on June 11 to elect a replacement for Ghalioun, who will continue as president until the election.³⁸ This has not allayed criticism of SNC leadership, as many members felt that the entire 313-member General Assembly should participate in elections. "We are fighting for democracy, and yet the council itself won't even allow for democratic elections... instead limiting the decision of the presidency to the inner circle that

NEWLY ESTABLISHED NATIONAL COALITIONS**FREE SYRIAN TRANSITIONAL NATIONAL GOVERNMENT**

The Free Syrian Transitional National Government was formed in April 2012 by Saudi-based exile Nofal al-Dawalibi. Dawalibi had sought to join an alliance with current members of the SNC prior to its formation, but no agreement was made. The Free Syrian Transitional National Government is headquartered in Paris, France and is comprised of 35 ministers inside Syria and five members outside to coordinate financing, weapons, and humanitarian aid. While Dawalibi is a well-known opposition figure, and son of the last elected prime minister, the legitimacy of his organization has been questioned. To date, it has had little influence on the ground.

**SYRIAN TRANSITIONAL PARLIAMENT (STP)**

The Syrian Transitional Parliament was formed in May 2012 by Damascus-based activist Nayef Ayoub Shaaban. The STP consists of 120 seats filled by representatives from the local revolutionary councils throughout Syria. 70 percent of these seats are said to represent the internal opposition, while the remaining thirty percent represent the external opposition. Shaaban is not well-known inside Syria; his claims to have filled 96 seats in the parliament are unsubstantiated.

controls the council,” stated one LCC member.³⁹ Ghalioun himself initially proposed this idea, arguing that the whole council should meet to agree on an alternative. However, the Executive Committee rejected Ghalioun’s proposal, saying that it would be too difficult for the entire General Assembly to come to a consensus on a new leader at the current time.⁴⁰ “It would have been impossible to find a consensus candidate other than him [Ghalioun] if the whole council convened,” stated an anonymous general secretariat member.⁴¹

Emphasizing its democratic character is crucial to the SNC’s staying power. The SNC can weather internal divisions, the resignation of key dissident figures, and its rocky relationship with armed rebels, but it cannot survive the loss of the democratic principles that are the underpinning of resistance to the regime. It is vitally important that the SNC acts as a democratic body if it is going to continue to function as an opposition coalition. Yet, many members, including Haitham Maleh, have argued that the decision to limit the presidential election to the General Secretariat has already undermined the SNC’s attempts at democratic reform. The General Secretariat will simply continue to re-elect members of its own inner group, providing no way out of the current system. As veteran opposition figure Fawaz Tello, who resigned from the SNC in mid-May, said, “You have a classic situation in the SNC, not much different from the four decade-old totalitarian Assad family rule the uprising aims to topple. ... There is an elite in the SNC who have brought their own cohorts into the council. They will essentially re-elect themselves unless the SNC is seriously restructured.”⁴² These accusations are felt even more strongly inside Syria. One activist from the Homs Revolutionary Council claimed that his peers inside Syria do not believe that the SNC represents the Syrian people and that its leaders have “stolen the revolution” in an attempt to consolidate their own power.⁴³

As a result, the SNC may be on the verge of collapse. The gap between the SNC and the opposition operating inside Syria has widened, and it has become increasingly clear that the SNC is neither democratic nor enjoys widespread support. Recent events have highlighted the opposition coalition’s structural weaknesses, and its inability to effectively represent the grassroots protest movement. It is unclear whether upcoming June elections can help the SNC regain its legitimacy. In the end, the vote may not be enough to save the organization as other groups have formed to challenge the SNC.

NEW GROUPS CLAIM LEGITIMACY

Other opposition groups have attempted to offer alternative national opposition platforms as the SNC faces mounting legitimacy challenges. Saudi-based exile Nofal al-Dawalibi announced the formation of an interim government based in Paris called the Free Syrian Transitional National Government at the end of April 2012. The official announcement described the organization as a “democratic representation of the aims and goals of the revolution.”⁴⁴ Accordingly, the new “government” will seek to re-assert the democratic objectives of the opposition. “If we want to get rid of a minority regime that has governed for 50 years, we are not going to let another minority take power,” Dawalibi stated, explicitly referring to Muslim Brotherhood influence in the SNC.⁴⁵ He also announced that it “has the legitimacy on the ground that the SNC lacks,” claiming that the interim government is comprised of 35 ministers inside Syria and five members outside to coordinate financing, weapons, and humanitarian aid.⁴⁶ Dawalibi is the son of Syria’s last democratically elected prime minister, Maarouf al-Dawalibi, who served from 1961 to 1962, and he has used his family connections to assert his legitimacy as a representative of the Syrian people.⁴⁷ At the beginning of the uprising, Dawalibi

and a small group of his supporters sought to join an alliance with members of the current SNC, but they could not come to an agreement. A rift developed between Dawalibi and prominent SNC members as a result.⁴⁸

Dawalibi's new "interim government" is unlikely to become a viable opposition body despite his claims of greater legitimacy than the SNC. Dawalibi grew up in Saudi Arabia, has served as an advisor to the Saudi king, and is well connected in Gulf political circles. Yet he lacks a network inside Syria and has little independent credibility as an opposition figure. Some activists have even accused Dawalibi of being a puppet for Saudi Arabia, saying that the interim government is a front for Saudi influence and an attempt to direct the Syrian opposition.⁴⁹

Damascus-based activist Nayef Ayoub Shaaban formed a similar organization shortly after Dawalibi. On May 5, he announced that activists on the ground had created the Syrian Transitional Parliament (STP) in order to "send a message that we are the real representatives of the people" and that the government's elections "are a sham."⁵⁰ The constitution of the STP lays out a highly sophisticated structure based on "democratic principles" and a commitment to ensuring "democratic representation of the protest movement."⁵¹ This structure includes a parliamentary body consisting of 120 seats filled by representatives from local revolutionary councils throughout Syria. Shaaban added that 96 of these seats have already been filled, though the names of its members would not be revealed due to security concerns.

"The revolution is a hidden world," he noted – a fact not lost on those inside Syria as well as the international community trying to better understand the opposition.⁵²

Few Syrians and opposition figures took the STP's formation seriously. "The idea of a transitional parliament is looked on with a great deal of suspicion by members of the SNC, which has been widely recognized as a government in exile," said Bassam Imadi, a prominent member of the SNC and former Syrian ambassador to Sweden.⁵³ Representatives of both the SNC and the armed opposition coalition the Free Syrian Army (FSA) have said they know nothing about the new parliament and will not endorse such a body.⁵⁴ It is not surprising that the more well-established opposition organizations would dispute the STP's legitimacy, but activists within the protest movement have also discredited the new parliament. "Nobody knows about this new transitional parliament. Shaaban who? We don't know. Nobody has ever heard of him. How can he say he represents the revolution when nobody has heard of him before?" said one Damascus-based member of the Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC).⁵⁵

AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE SNC WITHIN SYRIA

Suspicious about the Free Syrian Transitional Government and the Syrian Transitional Parliament reflect a greater crisis of confidence within the opposition. Since the beginning of the uprising, deep divisions between the grassroots protest

OPPOSITION ORGANIZATIONS



LOCAL COORDINATION COMMITTEE (LCC)

The Local Coordination Committee is a national coalition that represents the local coordinating committees (tansiqiyat) which formed during the initial stages of the uprising. These committees are dominated by Syrian youth activists and elements of the grassroots protest movement. The LCC claims to represent fourteen local tansiqiyya sub-committees. It works with the Syrian Revolution General Committee and the Higher Revolutionary Council to coordinate protest activity. It is also part of the Syrian National Council, with members sitting on the council's general assembly.



الهيئة العامة
للثورة السورية

SYRIAN REVOLUTION GENERAL COMMITTEE (SRGC)

The Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC) was established in August 2011. It is the largest grassroots coalition. It represents roughly 70 percent of the revolutionary councils and the majority of the local coordinating committees, with fifty-six different organizations officially recognized in its charter. Though many of its key leaders have chosen to remain anonymous due to security concerns, the commission does include a number of prominent dissidents, including Suhair al-Atassi, Nidal Darwish, and SRGC spokesman Bassam Jarra. The SRGC has demonstrated a high degree of organization and works in conjunction with the local coordinating committees through its many bureaus and networks throughout Syria.



HIGHER REVOLUTIONARY COUNCIL

The Higher Revolutionary Council, also known as the Supreme Council for the Syrian Revolution, was established in May 2011. It was one of the first national coalitions to be created by grassroots activists. Like the SRGC and the LCC, it is a coalition of grassroots activists and local coordinating committees. The three organizations work closely together.

movement and those who claim to represent and speak on its behalf have stilted the development of a national organization. The protest movement, composed of diverse sectors of Syrian society and encompassing a range of beliefs, has had difficulty uniting on issues beyond the common goal of the fall of the regime. This diversity complicates the national-level organizations' claims to represent all aspects of the grassroots opposition and highlights the internal dissent and division with which coalitions such as the SNC have struggled.

The Friends of Syria countries see this lack of unity as crippling and have thus made unification a prerequisite for greater support. International leaders have demanded that the opposition develop into a single organization in order to provide a clear channel for international aid and support and to steer the revolution in a certain direction. In so doing, the international community has predicated the success of the revolution on the ability of the opposition to unite behind a strong leader—and has presented the SNC as the embodiment of this leadership. This emphasis on a single, national-level organization has left Syrians who do not support the regime but do not trust the SNC with no alternative. It has also alienated the grassroots movement that is frustrated with the leadership of the SNC. These activists have sought to deemphasize the need for a strong leader, fearing the replacement of one dictator with another.

Whether through official recognition or not, the international community has empowered the leadership of the SNC by channeling money and aid through it. The SNC's access to international funding has prevented its further dissolution. Many members, unhappy with the actions and policies of the SNC, chose not to resign and maintain ties to the organization for financial reasons. Dual loyalties have crippled the development of other national-level organizations. Opposition organizations, especially those tied to the grassroots protest movement, are torn between the need for popular legitimacy and access to funding, preventing greater unification on the ground.

The SNC is unlikely to emerge as an effective opposition platform, but grassroots activists have begun to form other meaningful political structures. Increased coordination between these smaller opposition organizations that are representative of particular communities within Syria would offer greater potential for success. The majority of Syrians active in the opposition have expressed their commitment to principles of democracy and political representation. A less centralized political opposition consisting of smaller groups and parties allied together would better represent the diverse reality of those seeking change within Syria. These smaller groups could then work together to develop a united political

front that meets the movement's core objectives. This could preserve specific interests while achieving the larger political objectives of the revolution.

The protest movement is already actualizing this political framework. The localized, nascent political structures known as Revolutionary Councils have largely coalesced behind three national-level organizations inside Syria. These three organizations – the Syrian Revolution General Commission, the Supreme Council of the Syrian Revolution, and the Local Coordination Committee – are divided geographically, and each exhibits varying levels of support and legitimacy in different parts of the country. As a result, each of the three organizations has adopted their own set of practices which they have found most conducive to the local committees and revolutionary councils with which they work. They are further divided in vision and approach to the revolution, with some choosing to work with the Syrian National Council and others refusing to do so. All three operate within the framework of an agreed upon national-level system and coordinate their efforts. All adhere to a set of general principles and are united behind the common goals and aspirations of the revolution, although each organization represents its own specific set of interests. All three organizations play a leadership role, despite the lack of a central leadership body. This decentralization has provided greater flexibility and allowed local activists to develop practices that work best within a geographically specific context. It has also helped these organizations retain mass support from diverse demographics as they are more responsive to the needs of their specific constituencies.

By adopting a decentralized leadership system, these organizations have succeeded in creating the foundations for greater political plurality where both the parliamentary and SNC elections failed. They have sought to create an environment conducive to political activism by supporting the practices and activities of local political structures. Ultimately, these organizations may become fully functioning political parties capable of creating the type of multiparty system necessary for a successful democratic transition in the event of regime change.

CONCLUSION

Assad has managed to retain a significant level of support this far into the fourteen-month uprising. He has accomplished this not only by raising the costs of dissent through disproportionate use of force but also by espousing a narrative of democratic reform in the recent parliamentary elections. This narrative has promoted a sense of normalcy and offered the silent majority the illusion of a peaceful

solution to the conflict, but recent events in Aleppo and Damascus, two important centers of regime support, suggest that this narrative is quickly unraveling. These events represent the breakdown of crucial pillars of support for the Syrian government. Without this support it is unlikely that Assad will be able to establish effective control over the country again.

As Assad struggles to maintain key centers of support, the SNC has faced similar struggles. By threatening to withdraw from the council, the Local Coordination Committee has pressured the SNC to consider its own democratic deficiencies. If the SNC decides that the success of the revolution is more important than its control of it, it can use its resources and talents to support the developing organizations on the ground. This decision would mean submitting the political ambitions of key SNC leaders to figures on the ground, representing a significant loss of influence for the SNC in the final outcome of the revolution. But it would also mean helping the protest movement grow and develop in a way that could lead to greater success.

The SNC must decide which path it will choose before it loses its relevance as an opposition platform. Ghalioun's resignation was a pivotal moment for the SNC because it offered the opportunity to assert the council's democratic principles. However, the decision to hold elections within the General Secretariat and limit overall participation suggests that SNC leaders are not ready to relinquish their primary position in the revolution. If this is the case, the SNC will slowly unravel as it continues to function ineffectively in the face of legitimacy issues and threats of defection.

With the collapse of the SNC more likely than ever and the emergence of other groups looking to replace it, the next few months will pose an important moment for the protest movement. Whether the grassroots opposition maintains the objectives of the peaceful demonstrations that started over a year ago and takes back the uprising from more radical groups eager to hijack it will make or break the ultimate success of the revolution. It is crucial that the opposition continues to develop political structures that are responsive to the people and create the foundations for a viable governing system if and when Assad falls.

Elizabeth O'Bagy is a Research Analyst at ISW.

NOTES

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