

DEMOCRATIC PLAY UNDER THE NAME OF SYRIAN LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS

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Analysis

On 17/7/2020, the Syrian Parliamentary elections, which were postponed twice due to the coronavirus, was held. This election was held even as Syria was having a concerning upswing in the numbers of coronavirus infections and deaths. The supreme electoral commission said that there were 7,313 polling stations in all governorates to vote for about 2,100 candidates who contested for 250 seats in the parliament, called “**the People’s Assembly**.” These candidates were divided between the “workers and peasants” sector and “the rest of the people”, according to the description adopted by the Syrian regime, and between members of “**the National Progressive Front**” - which includes all parties, and in particular the Ba’ath Party - and independent candidates.

On the eve of the elections, a polling station in **Bosr Al-Harir** town in **Dara’a** governorate was targeted by unidentified people. Also, in the south of Damascus, one person died and another

one injured when an attack took place near **Anas Bin Malik** mosque.¹ The next day, the elections showed a slight turnout. Only 33% of the total elections’ eligible participated as the Justice Minister estimated 33% participation rate of the total eligible elections citing the coronavirus, while the participation rate in the 2016 elections was more than 57%.

From militia leaders and jihadists to MPs

As the Parliamentary campaign began, many candidates were numerous national defense militia leaders and fighters who had strong ties with Iran over the past years, such as **Omar Hassan**, a second-time candidate and founder of “**Al-Baqer Brigade**”. There was also **Jalal Medo** of the **Medo** family who founded the “**Medo groups**” militia that took part in military operations in eastern Aleppo.²



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Two members of the **Al-Barri** family also contested in the election. This family was known for their role in quelling demonstrations in Aleppo in the first year of the Syrian revolution and their subsequent participation in military operations. Hussein Jomaa, one of the “**Sapphira brigade**” founders, **Walid Al-Bushi**, a fighter in the “**Tiger forces**” and founder of the “**Wisam Al-Kheir**” association which takes care of the militia wounded in Aleppo were also candidates.³

Baraa Qatarji, the most prominent candidate, was a major smuggler who was transporting oil from ISIS-controlled areas to regime-held areas, before becoming one of the most important businessmen in Syria. In addition, members of the **National Social Syrian party**, which has close ties with the **Makhluf** family - relatives of **Bashar Al-Assad** - and fought alongside Assad’s forces in many cities, won a number of Parliament’s seats as independent candidates.⁴

And then **Mahir Mahfouz Qawarama**, leader of the “**National Defense**” militia in Hama Governorate and founder of the “**Al-Asna**” regiment in the Aleppo countryside, won the election, together with **Hassan Mohammed Shahid** and **Hussam Al-Qatarji**, two leaders of the “**Qatarji**” militia, as well as **Kamal Mahmud**, leader of the “**Hawareth**” regiment in Hama countryside.⁵

On the other hand, some local activists in eastern Syria have confirmed that **Madloul Omar Al-Aziz**, one of the elected candidates for the people’s assembly, was a former leader of the “**Nusrah front**” in **Deir Ezzor** governorate between 2012-2015, and was known as “*The Slaughterer*”. He fled to Damascus after ISIS entered the region.⁶ He allied with the Assad regime and established a local militia that fought with Assad’s forces and pursued wanted individuals. He won the elections using Iranian support, buying votes, and bribing polling station workers.

The same story goes for **Fadi Ramadan Al-Afis** who became a candidate after leaving his position as a former ISIS security leader in

Deir Ezzor Governorate. He arrested dozens of civilians, engaged in banditry, theft, and civilian smuggling from ISIS-controlled areas. He also controlled many suspicious operations and got thousands of dollars from it.⁷ **Al-Afis** later moved from the ISIS ranks to become a leader in the Iranian-backed “**Al-Baqir Militia**”, which has been known for its moral depravity, theft, and looting.

Several previously known names were successful in the legislative elections, in addition to the **Al-Baath** party members. All of that suggests that the Assad regime is trying to reward those who stood by him in his war against his own people. As he has run out of money, he is offering them positions with power and immunity in order to ensure their loyalty, especially since many of them are close to Iran, which has been the main supporter of the Assad regime and the reason why he is still in power until now.

Rigged election to improve Assad’s image

Witnesses’ testimonies from Assad-control areas indicate that there were many electoral irregularities and fraud. Employees and university students were forced to participate in the elections, using a pre-printed list of “chosen” candidates’ names.

One of the Assad regime’s journalists indicated on his Facebook page that the participation rate did not exceed 10%, and the percentage had been raised and the numbers tampered. He implied that the election supervisors voted on behalf of some people using their national identity numbers, voted using some deceased peoples’ names, voting more than once with the same national identity number, or poked money for the voters to vote for candidates who offered bribes to those in charge of some centers.⁸

The United States has called the Syrian legislative elections a “forgery election” saying that its sole purpose was to “give false legitimacy” to the authority of Bashar Al-Assad. US Cabinet spokesman **Morgan Ortogoss** said

in a statement, “The Assad regime held so-called Parliamentary Elections in Syria. Bashar Al-Assad is seeking to present this dubious election as a success against alleged Western plotting, but in reality it is simply another in a long line of Assad’s stage-managed, unfree votes in which the Syrian people have no real choice.”⁹

Ortagos said that Syria has seen no free and fair elections since the Ba’ath party came to power more than 50 years ago, and this year was no exception. Also, Syrians residing outside the country – comprising nearly one quarter of Syria’s pre-revolution population – were not permitted to vote. This disenfranchised population includes the more than 5 million refugees driven out of the country by the regime’s relentless war against its own citizens.

Nine years of war and nothing has changed.

Nine years after the popular protests happened, in which the Assad regime ignored the people’s demands and confronted it with force, nothing has changed in the Assad regime’s mindset or its policy in managing Syria.

The root of the country’s problem still exists and has even escalated dramatically; and this

regime still believes in a security solution and depends on its militiamen to run the country. So all pressures, even UN resolutions or economic sanctions, will not force Assad to engage in any democratic change that would allow the people to gain their rights or freedom.

Many Syrians realize that the Syrian parliament is a mere decor in order to convince the world that the Assad regime is running the country in a civilized manner. They also realize that their representatives are unable to pass any law or hold the government accountable, they only applaud the President and pass all the legislation and decisions that have been approved through the intelligence services that effectively govern the country.

On the other hand, Iran is trying to assert its control over Syria by ensuring its influence in most parts of the state. This is the same scenario that it has exercised in Iraq, when its “popular mobilization militias” pushed into the Iraqi Parliament, which formed the largest stream, won the election, and formed the government, assuming strategic positions.

Endnotes

¹ The “Syrian the People’s Assembly Elections: modest turnout and mistrust”, Middle East, 20/7/2020 <https://bit.ly/3gzGBSQ>

² Iran is present in the nominations “parliament” Al Assad regime’s ,Syria Tv,27/6/2020 <https://bit.ly/2YEW11s>

³ The Previous source

⁴ The Syrian people’s assembly Elections:worthless political play,The New Arabi,19/7/2020, <https://bit.ly/2DvSyu6>

⁵ Former leader of “Jabhat al-Nusra” gains a seat in the Assad regime’s “People’s Assembly” (photo), Syria Call,26/7/2020, <https://bit.ly/31ELT9b>

⁶ The Previous source

⁷ “The Slaughterer” A commander in the nusrah front in Alassad parliament. , Orient news, 23/7/2020, <https://bit.ly/31gkkD3>

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/omar.diermama/posts/4152036331536568>

⁹ Assad Regime’s Parliamentary Elections, U.S. Department of State Office of the Spokesperson For Immediate Release Statement by Morgan Ortagos, Spokesperson ,July 20, 2020 , <https://bit.ly/33Nhng1>