

“Blood elections”

Presidential election in Syria within the Red Regime Lines

The oppositional groups called the June 3 presidential election “blood elections” because of the huge numbers of lives lost during the three years of war. When pro-regime voters marked their ballots with blood instead of ink, “blood elections” took on a new meaning.

While Western media and decision makers presented the Syrian election as both surprising and inappropriate, this Insight argues it was not. The elections held within the red lines of the regime where Bashar al-Asad won a landslide victory with 89% of the votes, represented the essence of the official Syrian narrative: The Syrian people are behind Bashar al-Asad.

Emma Jørum PhD.

Associate Professor,
Researcher,
Uppsala University, Sweden

CMI CHR.
MICHELSEN
INSTITUTE

Before the votes of the June presidential election in Syria were counted, their outcome was already known. Unless the balance of power between the regime and armed oppositional groups radically changes on the ground, Syria is in for another seven years with Bashar al-Asad as president. The new Syrian constitution, adopted in February 2012, changed the voting process from a referendum, where voters could say “yes” (or, in theory, “no”) to the incumbent president, into a presidential election with at least one candidate running against the incumbent. However, the selection process in place, significantly reduces the importance of these formal constitutional changes, as it allows only candidates with no chance of winning to run against the President. The essence of the voting process – to legitimize the President’s continuation in power – has therefore not changed.

“Western and Zionist conspiracies”

The regime narrative presents Syria as the last defender of the Arab cause and the only resistance to Western ambitions of control over the Middle East. One of the most important goals for “foreign conspirators” is to remove the Syrian regime; hence, the events of the last

three years. All attacks on the Syrian regime – whether verbal or armed – are filed under the category of “imperialist and zionist conspiracies.” The initially peaceful popular uprising against the regime that broke out in March 2011 never became part of the narrative. Instead, whatever opponents to the regime are admitted on Syrian territory are not Syrians demanding change, but armed foreign terrorists taking part in the conspiracy and leaving the regime no choice but to respond violently. Evidence of any form of peaceful opposition, such as video clips and photos of unarmed demonstrators met by bullets that widely circulated in social media during the first months of the uprising, were consequently dismissed as fake. Syrian TV even reported some of them to be the result of hostile satellite channels – primarily of al-Jazeera – which would have built replicas of Syrian cities in Israel and Qatar and used actors posing as unarmed demonstrators and heavily armed Syrian soldiers. The official Syrian narrative thereby holds that there has never been any popular uprising driven by Syrians and that Syrians are fully behind the regime. The need to underpin this narrative turned the presidential election of 2014 into more than the routine rubber stamp approval of another presidential

term. They became a way of confirming that Syria is strong and sovereign, that it does not succumb to outside pressure, and that foreign conspiracies are in reality counterproductive as they only result in stronger support for the regime. The fact that Bashar al-Asad came out victorious, despite having to run against other candidates for the first time, was meant to prove this.

Conditioned elections

While holding elections served to confirm the official narrative of the Syrian regime, it also sent a clear message about the future. The elections effectively confirm the regime's refusal of a transitional government, as conveyed during the Geneva talks in February 2014 between representatives of the regime and some of the many oppositional forces, under the auspices of former United Nations and Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi. One of the main pillars in Brahimi's road map for Syria, the creation of such a transitional government would have been the first step towards a political solution to the Syrian war. It would have involved the opposition and the regime having to compromise and work together during a period leading up to free and fair elections. This idea has, in all fairness, been rejected also by most oppositional figures, not only the regime. The elections simply confirmed that the regime will not seek compromise or any form of collaboration with its opponents.

As could only be expected, the elections were held within the red lines of the regime. The 2012 constitution makes clear that, in order to run for president, candidates must have lived in Syria for the last ten years. This conveniently barred the exiled opposition candidates from running. That said, none of the potential opposition candidates would have run even if allowed to. Running, with no real prospects of actually winning, would have granted legitimacy to elections only meant to boost the regime. Of the over twenty individuals – including two women and a Christian (the latter also automatically barred from running as the constitution states that the president must be Muslim) – who did present their candidacies in April 2014, two made it all the way through both the Supreme Constitutional Court, which has to approve each candidacy, and the parliament, where each candidate must gain the support of at least 35 members. As expected, both successful candidates were members of Syria's tolerated opposition. Dr. Hasan al-Nuri, originally from Damascus, is a former member of parliament and was secretary of state for administrative development for two years during Bashar al-Asad's first term. He now heads the National Initiative for Administration and Change, created by the regime in order to combat corruption. Maher Hajjar is originally from Aleppo and since 2012 a member of parliament for the constituency of this city. A former member of the Syrian communist party, he joined the National Committee for the Unity of Syrian Communists in 2003. Al-Nuri on the other hand is known to have strong connections to the business community and is himself a successful businessman. While their economic policies could thereby be expected to differ, their political views and their ideas of how to end the ongoing crisis squared with

regime rhetoric. Putting an end to terrorist activities and guaranteeing the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria were their main priorities. In addition, standard elements were present in their political programs, such as the importance of liberating the occupied Syrian territory. As it did in previous decades, the occupied Syrian territory includes the Golan Heights (occupied by Israel in 1967 and in effect annexed in 1981) but, as a result of the severely deteriorated Syrian-Turkish relations, it now also includes the Turkish region of Hatay (liwa' iskandarun in Arabic). In particular the election program of al-Nuri confirmed the extent to which this region – annexed by Turkey in 1939 and the loss of which Syria has in reality accepted long ago – has made a comeback in Syrian official rhetoric. Since November 2012, Syrian media regularly reports on "popular voices" demanding its return. However, significantly, no Syrian regime representative has so far brought it up. The fact that al-Nuri's program did, signals that Hatay will continue to constitute a rallying point for anti-Turkish sentiment among pro-regime Syrians and a growing pain in the already deeply troubled Syrian-Turkish relations for the years to come.

Low profile campaigns

The lack of energetic campaigning on behalf of presidential candidates Hajjar and al-Nuri was a clear signal that neither of them saw their candidacies as serious bids to take over the presidency. Neither Hajjar, who initiated a low-profile campaign as soon as his candidacy was approved in late April, nor al-Nuri, who waited until the middle of May to announce his election program, expected to win. Their comments on election day made clear that winning was not their goal. Both pointed to the elections as a victory for the Syrian people and, in Hajjar's words, who would win was "unimportant." Whether these two defeated candidates will now fade into oblivion or whether they will be given other positions on the presidential platform will shed further light on why they were chosen to run against the incumbent president. Al-Nuri, during a press conference following his defeat, clearly signalled his preparedness to take on other political positions. Whether he and Hajjar were chosen to run so they would become known in preparation for receiving tasks within the presidency or whether the choice of two largely unknown candidates simply was a way of ensuring their failure – in exchange of privileges in other areas – remains to be seen.

Support for al-Asad

The fact that the presidential election did not even come close to being democratic by any acceptable standard does not undermine the fact that President al-Asad has supporters and followers. To assume that election turnout and participation in other manifestations of support are the result of fear and force only is a gross simplification of things. Supporters' reasons for standing behind the regime vary. Many belong to religious minorities that enjoy regime protection and see both post-2003 developments in Iraq and the treatment of civilians by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS/ISIL) – and a number of other armed fundamentalist groups

– as clear warnings of what is to be expected should the Syrian regime fall. The failure of both the Syrian National Council and the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Oppositional Forces to, at an early stage, clearly spell out the role of Islam and their future policies for religious minorities in the post-Asad Syria have added to the reluctance of al-Asad’s default supporters to trust oppositional forces. Other supporters are members of the clientelistic networks that gain financially and socially from the regime. In return they offer unconditional support and constitute one of the main pillars of regime stability. There are also those who blame the oppositional forces for the state Syria is in and see Bashar al-Asad as the symbol of life as they knew it before the war brought havoc and destruction. Still others originally supported the opposition but have switched sides, as hope that these forces will be able to deliver has waned.

The fact that the presidential election did not even come close to being democratic by any acceptable standard does not undermine the fact that President al-Asad has supporters and followers.

Connected to both the official Syrian narrative and the supporters of the regime is the voting-abroad process, which was a prominent feature of the 2014 elections. While voting abroad is not a new phenomenon for Syrians – they were able to vote in presidential referenda as well – never before has the importance of voting abroad been stressed to this degree nor has the voting-abroad process been so meticulously organized. All Syrian embassies able to do so (39 in all), registered voters for the first two weeks in May 2014 with the actual casting of ballots on May 28. Expatriate voting was meant to help increase legitimacy as elections in Syria itself could only be held on regime-controlled territory. In fact, large parts of the Syrian territory were inaccessible to the election apparatus and process – the rebel-held areas mainly in the northwest and the de facto autonomous Kurdish region (where relations to the regime are uncertain). Getting expatriate voters to cast their ballots was therefore important, as this would increase the turnout percentage. Since all Syrians abroad opposed to the regime boycotted the election, all images from the voting-abroad process in Syrian media confirmed the official narrative and were identical to images from within Syria; supporters of Bashar al-Asad waving the Syrian official red-white-and-black two-star flag (as opposed to the oppositional green-white-and-black three-star flag) expressing their love for their country and its president. This, again, would confirm the fact that all Syrians are with the regime.

Syrians abroad

In addition to having the voting-abroad process counterbalance the fact that only part of the Syrian territory could be included in the election process, it also served the Syrian strategy of bringing the regime and its overseas supporters together. Since 2011, pro-regime Syrians abroad are frequent guests in Syrian media where they confirm the official

Syrian narrative of events. They talk of their activities aimed at informing the public in their states of residence of the foreign conspiracies that have afflicted Syria. For obvious reasons, opposition abroad is less visible in Syrian media. A photo of anti-regime demonstrators outside the Syrian embassy in Stockholm on election day was posted on the Facebook page of the weekly radio show *مع المغتربين*, With the Expatriates, broadcasting from Damascus. A show dedicated to reporting on the activities of pro-regime Syrians around the world, its caption read: “Those maniacs in Stockholm yesterday...ha ha ha.” Interestingly, and in accordance with the regime narrative, many of the comments posted by regime supporters held that the demonstrators were not Syrian but foreigners.

Voters abroad talking to Western media gave varying reasons for voting. Some pointed to possible reprisals against family in Syria or fear that permission to re-enter Syria would be denied in the future unless votes were cast and registered. The

majority of the interviewees, however, stressed their support and love for Bashar al-Asad and their firm belief that only he could untangle Syria’s crisis. Again, there is no reason to assume that these are not their true convictions.

“Blood elections”

Oppositional groups have referred to the 2014 elections as “blood elections” because of the huge numbers of lives that have been lost during the three years of war. On election day, the term took on a new meaning as pro-regime voters marked their ballots with blood instead of ink after having pricked their fingers with pins available at the polling stations. After three years of violent conflict, with more than 150,000 people killed and millions displaced, the regime points to the elections as the only possible political solution to Syria’s crisis. Through these elections the Syrian people had their say and chose the candidate they trusted could put an end to the bloodshed. Those who now oppose the continuation of Bashar al-Asad in power are thereby, according to the official Syrian narrative, against a political solution to the crisis. This, in turn, justifies dealing with them in “unpolitical” ways. Regime bombardments of residential areas in Aleppo and Homs can therefore be expected to continue. So can violent abuse of civilians in areas held by some of the fundamentalist jihadi groups. The solution both the regime and most oppositional groups are looking for remains of the military type, with a complete elimination of opponents as the final goal. The elections did not change this approach. They were a show of force and a boosting of the morale of the regime and its supporters but did not change the balance of power. They will therefore not have an impact on events on the ground. There, the end of the war remains distant and difficult to imagine.

CMI (Chr. Michelsen Institute)

Phone: +47 47 93 80 00

Fax: +47 55 31 03 13

E-mail: cmi@cmi.no

CMI is an independent development research institute in Bergen, Norway. CMI generates and communicates research-based knowledge relevant for fighting poverty, advancing human rights, and promoting sustainable social development. CMI's research focuses on local and global challenges and opportunities facing low and middle income countries and their citizens. Our geographic orientation is towards Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America.

Editor: Ingvild Hestad Copy editor: Marianne Skjold Ovaldsen